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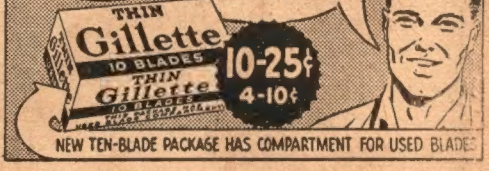

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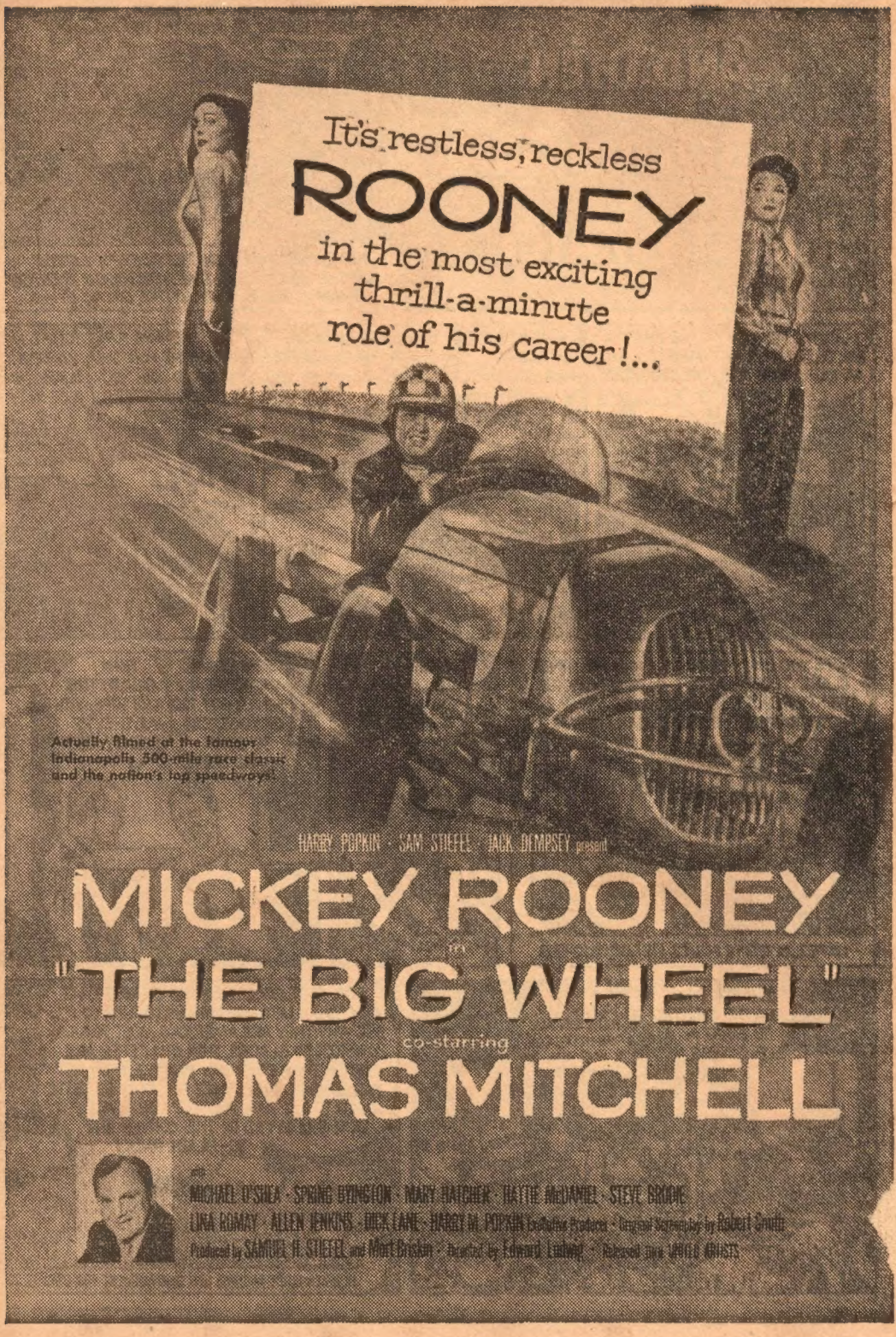
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VOL. 1 JANUARY, 1950 NO. 3

THUNDERING WESTERN NOVEL

BUCKSHOT BLUE'S PARTNER.....Walt Coburn 8
Through flaming range war, Bill Benton still sided the man who had done everything in his power to destroy him!
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TWO GRIPPING WESTERN NOVELETTES

PEACEFUL MAN—WITH A GUN!.....Bennett Foster 44
Young Wayne Prophet had to learn to stand on his own legs—even if it killed him!
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BLACK JOHN'S BANSHEE BARGAIN...James B. Hendryx 74
Black John leagued himself with invisible spirits—to sell equally invisible gold!
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FOUR FLAMING SHORT STORIES

ONE CAME BACK.....Thomas C. McClary 36
The white-hot desert would soon claim them both. But who would be first?
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BRIMSTONE SADDLEMATE.....Gunnison Steele 57
Dying, Trigger Tolliver made a bargain with the Grim Reaper: Double or nothing!
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THE SHIRT OFF HIS BLOODY BACK!.....Bart Cassidy 62
Little Dan bought a lawman's star—with his brother's blood!
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TWO MEN—ONE TOWN!.....William Donald Bray 66
Two men, in that deserted town, was one too many. . . .
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SPECIAL FEATURE

WALT COBURN'S HOME CORRAL.....Walt Coburn 6

February Issue Published December 21st!

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Walt Coburn's HOME CORRAL

HE WENT under the name of Bill Lorne the fall he worked with the Bear Paw Pool wagon. I'll always remember him as the man who got me into more trouble than a crew of cowhands could drag me out of. Bill Lorne shore liked to devil kids and I was the only kid on the big general roundup that worked the county with five roundup outfits. I was about fourteen then and it was my second beef roundup.

While I'm gray-headed now, I can still remember just about how Bill Lorne looked, how he sat his saddle, half-rumped, with his weight in his left stirrup. A six-footer, he was lean, with the course black hair of an Injun and a twisted grin that squinted up his left eye, like he was winking to share some hidden practical joke that was about to pop.

There must have been around a hundred and fifty good cowhands, all told, with five roundup outfits working. The wagon boss and one or two top-hand ropers did all the calf roping in the afternoons when we branded. The Bear Paw Pool always sent Bill Lorne in to heel 'em. And he seldom missed a loop. He was what you call a natural, without a single wasted motion. It looked easy the way Lorne sat his saddle, his old hat cocked jack-deuce, a cigarette hung in one corner of his mouth. He might be talking, swapping windies, with

(Continued on page 88)

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BUCKSHOT BLUE'S

Killer and outlaw though Buckshot Blue might be to all the range, to Bill Benton he was still a pardner, a man to ride the river with, a man beside whom he wanted to fight—and die!

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CHAPTER ONE

Trouble on the Rimrock

FROM the high rimrock on the side of Benton Butte, Bill Benton watched the two men below in the valley as they rode through the grazing cattle. He had been watching them for half an hour, waiting for them to do some roping and build a branding fire, or else cut out a small bunch of Benton cattle

PARTNER . . . . .

By Walt Coburn

Framed in the doorway was Doc Arnold. His face twisted as he took aim at Drake's back. . . .

Hell-Roaring Novel of Man-for-Man Loyalty

and haze them off into the rough country towards the badlands. But so far the two riders had made no bad move.

Bill Benton was on his way to the home ranch. He had just come from the cowboy contest at Miles City and was bringing back about seven hundred dollars in prize money and money he had won making side bets. He was riding a brand-new saddle. On the rear of the cantle was an engraved silver plate that said the saddle had been presented to the champion bronc rider. The saddle creaked as his horse grazed, back in the scrub pines.

Bill was in his early twenties. He had sandy hair, blunt, deeply tanned features, puckered eyes the color of the Montana skies after a rain. His mouth was wide, and when he grinned, and he grinned a lot, he showed a set of strong, white teeth. A crack cowman and a popular contestant at the rodeos, he was as well liked on his home range in Montana as he was at the big contests all over the West from Calgary, Canada, to Prescott, Arizona. He loved the game and he needed the money to keep his outfit from going broke. With bad prices for beef, drought, hard winters, and rustlers like those two men down below, he occasionally ran into hard times. . . .

He knew both those men. Ike Skelton and Sid Purcell. The SP spread down in the badlands was in the habit of dragging hungry loops. They were a pair of fast cowboys, always well mounted, and even tougher than they claimed to be. And they hired hard-riding, tight-lipped men who knew all the angles of the game.

Bill watched them as they finished their careful inspection of the cattle; then he mounted his horse and rode down the trail to the floor of the valley. He crossed Beaver Creek and loped out to meet Skelton and Purcell.

Ike Skelton was a big, beefy man with the brick-red, puffy face of a heavy drinker. He had small, light-colored eyes that were always bloodshot. His nose had been broken. His mouth was heavy, thick-lipped. He always needed a shave and a clean shirt. Despite his paunch, his weight, he was fast with a rope or with a gun. And he never sidestepped a fight. Men feared and respected the ability of Ike Skelton.

Sid Purcell was tall, lean, hawk-beaked, thin-lipped, black-eyed. He never drank, smoked or chewed. He had powerful, bony hands. He was a tight-lipped man when it came to talking, and never smiled. But men who knew claimed that Purcell was easier to get along with than Skelton who, at certain stages of drunkenness, became offensive and abusive.

Bill Benton rode up to them. Sid Purcell nodded and looked at the new saddle.

Ike Skelton said, "H're yuh, Bill?"

"Kind of off your range, ain't you?" said Bill when he had given them a curt "howdy."

"Some," said Skelton.

"I sighted you lookin' through the cattle."

Sid Purcell nodded. "Yeah."

"Thinkin' of buyin', or just lookin' around? Window shoppin', as the women call it?"

"We ain't buyin' no Slash B cattle," said Skelton, rolling a cigarette deftly between his thick fingers. "But we was lookin' around."

"Just as long as you ain't takin' home any samples, I got no kick," Bill said. "But when I sight you lookin' through my cattle like a monkey lookin' for fleas on a cat, I got some right to ask how come."

Sid Purcell's black eyes hardened. He jerked a gloved thumb back towards the rolling hills a mile or two away. "Want us to show you somethin' that'll prove we got reasons fer bein' here?"

"Shore thing, Sid," agreed Bill. There was something about the attitude of the two men that made him a little uneasy. They were too sure of themselves. Too

damned mysterious, too, he decided.

THEY rode in silence. Purcell led the way up a cut coulee. There, dug from under the dirt where somebody had caved in a cutbank, was a fresh beef hide. Purcell spread it out. There was a large hole cut in the left side, another high up behind the flank. The Skelton-Purcell cattle were branded with an *S* on the ribs, a *P* on the thigh, high up near the critter's spine. The brands had been cut out.

"They butchered in the next coulee. Left nothin' but some blood and the grass from the stomach. Injun style," Skelton said.

"The reservation," said Bill Benton, "ain't more than a mile from here. It wouldn't be the first time the Injuns needed slow elk meat and done some moonlight butcherin'."

Ike Skelton shook his heavy, iron-gray head. "This ain't no Injun job. They might have helped. But what Injun around here owns a .303 Savage rifle? This empty shell was near where they butchered. We follered the wagon tracks as far as the road. Lost 'em there. This beef was peddled in town. Some snake-bellied butcher ain't too particular about seein' the hide that is supposed to be with the meat he buys. Don't you own a .303 Savage? One you traded a saloon man out of last Fall?"

"I own a gun like that and you know it," Bill answered coldly. "You tried to buy it from the saloon gent but wouldn't bid enough. But this hide is fresh. The butcherin' was done last night or the night before. I've been away for two weeks. Takin' in the Miles City show."

"Have the rifle with you?" asked the thin-lipped Purcell.

"You know damn' well I didn't," Bill snapped. "And what you're drivin' at is that somebody from the Slash B ranch did the butcherin'. That it?"

"We'll leave that to your judgment. You know we got no proof. But any man's entitled to his own opinion."

"Providin'," replied Bill Benton, "that he don't go runnin' off at the head too much." He looked hard at Skelton.

"When I run off at the head," said the burly man, "I'll have proof to back what I'm sayin'. And I won't say it unless you or that pardner of yourn is there to listen. But I'm tellin' you now, young feller, one of our steers has bin butchered on your range. Me and Sid ain't the kind that call in the law. But by God we'll ride this range any damned time we please."

"Better have the law with you," said Bill Benton grimly, "if you do any night ridin'. I'm not scared of you—neither is my pardner, Buckshot Blue. I reckon you both have had proof of that. The last time you tackled Buckshot, Skelton, you had to get fitted for some store teeth. And get a nose patched up. So, gents, when you start that butcherin' subject in town, get old Doc Brady sobered up. You'll need him."

Ike Skelton's face had purpled. Sid Purcell's thin-lipped mouth twitched in what might have been a smile. That whipping Buckshot Blue had handed Ike was a sore subject with the big cowman. . . .

AS BILL BENTON rode along home he tried to forget this butcherin' business and the empty .303 shell. Hell, there were other rifles of that make and caliber in the country. And after all, they had not shown him the empty shell.

A few miles and he was in a better humor. He was going home to the ranch where he had been born and raised. The ranch his father, Ben Benton, had located back in '65, there in the valley at the foot of the Little Rockies. Bill knew every foot of this range, had ridden it on dark nights in a blizzard more than once, and had never gotten lost. He could always find his way to the home ranch.

Bill hardly remembered his mother. He was too young when she died. Ben had been father and mother to him and had

taught him the cattle business from all angles. Bill was running the outfit when he was seventeen, handling horses and cattle and men and making a top job of it. Old Ben had been almighty proud of his son. He had wanted to leave to his son the biggest outfit in Montana.

But that hard winter of '86 had broken him, even as it had broken many another big cowman—even as it broke the back of the Montana cow country. When the Chinook came, it was too late to save the cow country. Spring found the coulee, the ridges, the flats, covered with the carcasses of dead horses and cattle.

Ben Benton, like other big cowmen, was broke. It hadn't broken the fighting heart of that old pioneer Indian fighter. He started all over again, but he never was able to make it back. He had to lose some of his land to buy more cattle. But he never quit. He hung and rattled with the school teacher he married. Together they worked and did their best to make an outfit out of the broken remnants. But when Bill was born, the Slash B was only a small outfit, as cow outfits are counted where there is plenty of open range.

Bill was nineteen when his father was found shot in the back. He had sold some cattle and had been paid cash which he was riding in town to deposit in the bank. There was no money on his person when the body was found. And the killer had never been apprehended. The murder remained a mystery.

Bill managed to make the outfit pay until bad prices, some dry summers, and three hard winters almost wiped him out. He borrowed what money he could from the bank, hired an honest man to run the spread, and started to play the rodeos around the country. Bill Benton was a natural-born bronc rider and one of the fastest ropers in the cow country, north or south. And he knew how to save what he earned.

At Calgary he threw in with a tall cowboy named Harry Blue. Buckshot Blue, they called him, and he made a good running mate for Bill Benton. Buckshot was a sure, fast roper, a good bronc rider and a good bulldogger. And he stayed sober enough not to blow his chances.

Tall, dark, with black hair and dark gray eyes under straight black brows, he looked as if he might have some Indian blood in his veins. Women called him the handsomest cowboy in the country, but it had never seemed to swell Buckshot Blue's head to any extent. And while his hot temper had made him enemies, most men liked him.

Bill and Buckshot had pooled their bets. They worked together, split their winings, and were known as the fastest team tiers in the contest game. Buckshot bought a half interest in the Slash B. And for three or four years they made it pay. Then a horse turned over on Buckshot and smashed hell out of his right shoulder. A drunken doctor had done a bad job of bone setting. When the bones had knit the shoulder was stiff. Buckshot could not raise his hand as high as his hat. His roping days were over. That was a year or more ago.

Buckshot had taken his injury hard. He had ridden to town to kill the doctor, but the man had quit the country. Buckshot Blue didn't show up at the ranch for a week. When he did show up he was almost too drunk to sit his horse and he had two gallon jugs of whiskey on the saddle. It was the first drop of whiskey that had ever been on the Slash B ranch, because Ben Benton, though he took an occasional drink in town and did not mind other men drinking, would not allow the stuff at home. Whiskey, he claimed, didn't mix with work and it bred trouble. Ben had handed down that ruling to his son. But when the bitter-eyed Buckshot showed up with two jugs, Bill didn't have the heart to start a quarrel. After all, the ranch was half Buckshot's.

After that there was always a jug of whiskey in Buckshot's room. And sometimes the tall cowboy would get drunk. But not too often, for there was work to do.

Buckshot ran the ranch while Bill made the rodeos. Buckshot would not go near a rodeo. He wouldn't even carry a rope on his saddle. Bill understood. It was hell. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Prodigal's Homecoming

BEN BENTON had built the big log house during his prosperous days, before the winter of '86 smashed him. He had spared no expense in its construction. It was built of the best of logs, with good floors, and a big porch that ran around three sides of the house. There was a big living room with an enormous stone fireplace, that burned cordwood, and four bedrooms, a kitchen and dining roof. It was now equipped with modern plumbing and the big porch had been screened in.

It was after supper time when Bill Benton got to the ranch. He put his horse in the barn. Then he went on to the house. He found Buckshot Blue in the big living room playing poker with three men whom he recognized as being three prominent citizens of Moccasin. There were Doc Arnold and his brother Slick, who owned the saloon and gambling house and honky-tonk named the Antlers. With them was a cattle and horse buyer named Drake, whose reputation as an honest man would not bear too close a scrutiny. The room was heavy with cigar and cigarette smoke. There was the odor of whiskey and stale beer. Empty bottles and broken glass littered the fine old Navajo rugs. Buckshot was drunk. The cattle buyer's heavy face was red and his eyes were puffed and bloodshot. But the lean-faced, long-fingered, sallow-complexioned Doc and Slick Arnold were sober enough. Too sober, maybe, for Buckshot's sake.

There was a glint of defiance in Buckshot Blue's eyes as he looked up from his poker hand.

"Didn't expect you back till next week, Bill."

"Decided to skip the Billings show. How's everything, Buck?" Bill Benton tried to keep his tone even.

Buckshot grinned faintly. "Just like you see it. You know these boys here."

"Shore. H'are yuh?" His tone was flat. No welcome showed in his eyes.

"We drove out to knock down a few prairie chickens and ducks," volunteered Drake.

"Hope you're havin' good luck," said Bill, and went on through and down the hall to his room. Inside he was boiling with anger. What right had Buck to ask those crooks out here and make a damned saloon and gambling joint out of the Slash B ranch? It was a wonder they didn't fetch some of their dance hall girls and do the job right. Make a damned road house out of the place!

Somehow Bill Benton always thought of the house as belonging to his father. His mother had lived here. It had been their home. Bill had been born in this house. Buckshot had no right to do what he was doing, drunk or sober.

Bill went to the kitchen. A wrinkled little old Chinese grinned a welcome. There was joy in his bright brown eyes.

"How long has that game been goin' on, Wong?" Bill asked.

"One night, one day. Damn hell."

"The old gent must be turnin' over in grave."

"You betcha. Damn hell."

Bill walked on back to the living room. Buckshot, who had been talking, broke off in the middle of a sentence.

"Have a drink, Bill."

Bill Benton, a little white around the lips, ignored Buckshot and the proffered

drink. His eyes took in the two Arnolds and Drake.

"The game is over. Cash in and push back your chairs." Bill's voice was cold. "Hook up your buggy team and get the hell off this ranch. Don't ever come back. Get out."

Buckshot swore and kicked back his chair. "Who in hell do you think you are, anyhow? I got an interest in this place. I asked these men here. They don't have to go till they damn please. I've stood about all I can take of your Sunday School ways. For two cents I'd knock you plumb through the wall."

"You can't do it and you know you can't," Bill came back quietly. "You're drunk, Buck. You're makin' whiskey talk. You and I will settle this when you sober up in the mornin'. These damned tin-horn sports are draggin' it. If they don't get out, I'll throw 'em out. I'm givin' 'em five minutes to clear out. If they're still here, I'll do some house cleanin'."

Bill Benton walked back to his room. He hadn't meant to make it so tough on Buck but the play had come up that way. Buck was going to make a hell of a row, like as not, after his friends had left. And Bill didn't want trouble with his partner. He thought a lot of Buckshot Blue.

He heard the two gamblers and the beefy cattle buyer leave the house. Heard their voices as they went to the barn, and some minutes later Bill heard them drive away in Drake's rig. He went back to the big living room and opened the door and windows to air the place out. Later on, old Wong would clean up the mess.

Buck didn't come back from the barn. Bill reckoned he must have gone to town with the others. It was dark now. Bill went on to the barn to make sure the few horses they kept up were fed and watered. He lit the lantern that hung by a peg near the saddle room.

In the middle of the dirt floor sat Buckshot Blue. Across his lap was Bill's new saddle. The prize saddle. Its leather had been cut to shreds. Buckshot sat there, the long-bladed stock-knife in his hand, a terrible, twisted look on his white face, blind tears coursing down his cheeks. He was swaying a little, to and fro, and from his twisted mouth came a muttered jumble of incoherent words. He did not recognize Bill.

Bill approached warily, not knowing what the man would do with that knife, loco as he was from bad whiskey.

But Buckshot made no effort at resistance when Bill twisted the knife away, closed it, and put it in his own pocket. Then he half dragged, half carried his partner to the house and put him to bed. Buckshot's face looked greenish in the lamplight. His eyes were glassy, staring, smeared with hot tears. His twitching mouth kept muttering. Bill tied him to the bed. He had seen men go loco from booze, like maniacs, abnormally strong and dangerous. These past months of brooding, kept inside the man, might break out in disastrous violence. The ruined saddle at the barn might be a warning signal.

SICK at heart, Bill went back to the living room. Old Wong was already cleaning up, muttering Chinese imprecations of some sort as he labored. Old Wong, who had worked here since long before that fatal winter of '86, worshiped Bill, whom he had helped raise. And he took little trouble to conceal his dislike for Buckshot Blue.

"Heap hogs. Damn hell. All time ketchem dlunk. Damn hell. You likee suppah now, maybe?"

"I'll grab a bite later on," Bill answered listlessly. "Don't feel hungry."

He looked at the litter of broken glass, cigar butts, empty bottles, cigarette stubs that had burned holes in the rugs. It was small wonder that Wong, neater than most women housekeepers, was on the verge of tears of wrath and grief. Now and then,

as if appealing to them for moral support, his doglike brown eyes looked up at the two crayon portraits of Bill's father and mother in their huge gilt frames on either side of the stone fireplace. Bill felt sorry for the old Chinese.

Ben Benton, back in the early days, had saved Wong's life at Great Falls, Montana, where no Chinese was allowed to stay longer than between two suns. Or between sunrise and sundown. Wong, hardly more than a boy, had wandered into the town, half famished, his shoes so badly worn that his feet were bleeding. He had been prospecting, placer mining along the Missouri River with some other Chinese. White miners had robbed their camp, killed two of the Chinese, and had thrown young Wong in the river. Luck, in the shape of a drifting cottonwood log and a sand bar below, had saved his life. His aimless wandering in an unknown country had brought him to the then small town of Great Falls, and, unfortunately, at a time shortly after the edict was issued that all Chinese must keep moving. It was a smelter town, a copper town, a union town. They wanted no part of the heathen Chinee.

So Ben Benton, cattleman, who happened to be in town, saw the mob of miners and smeltermen jostling and abusing a small young Chinese who could understand but two words of the English language. He kept repeating them as they jerked at his braided queue and slapped him. The boy's face was bleeding, his cotton clothes torn to shreds. His high-pitched voice calling out in piteous appeal.

"Damn hell . . . damn hell . . ."

Ben Benton took a hand. The six-shooter in his hand was all the law he needed. He was a powerful man in those days and afraid of nothing on earth.

"Damn hell . . . damn hell . . ." the Chinese boy kept telling Ben as they waited for the train. He was trying to thank this big, wide-shouldered, bearded man for saving his life. At Helena, the cowman tried to leave him with some of his own race. But a Chinese storekeeper there explained to Ben that the boy would never leave him. That he would work for him forever for nothing.

So Wong became a fixture at the Slash B ranch, the devoted slave of the man who had saved his life, though Ben paid him wages. Save for two weeks each year when he went to Helena to celebrate the Chinese New Year, he stayed there at the ranch.

"Damn hell . . . damn hell . . ." Wong's eyes now looked up at the two crayon portraits, life size in their clumsy gilt frames that never were allowed to gather one speck of dust.

Bill wandered aimlessly around the room, smoking, trying to think. He could hear Buckshot snoring heavily now. He wondered what the outcome of their

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partnership would be. He reckoned he would have to buy out Buckshot's half interest. Things couldn't go on like this much longer. Buckshot Blue would have to straighten up and do his share. Bill's rodeo earnings were paying expenses but not much more than that. And Buckshot was neglecting his share of it. Even a man with a crippled arm could get out and ride around and keep an eye on things. Hire a man or two to keep the fences up, keep the cattle from drifting, brand up the calves missed on the spring roundup, boss the hay crews. But Buckshot was not on the job. There would have to be a showdown of some kind—and that before very long.

Bill's pacing the floor had brought him to the far end of the room. To the gun-rack on the wall. Shotguns and Winchester carbines were there with a couple of six-shooters—and the .303 Savage sporting rifle.

Bill took the Savage from the rack. Guns were a hobby of his. He always kept them oiled and clean, after the manner of all gun lovers.

He sniffed at the barrel of the rifle, then took a clean white cloth and ramrod and ran it down the barrel. The rag came out fouled with burned powder. Bill finished cleaning the gun, then replaced it in the rack. Wong's eyes were watching him. But Bill didn't seem to notice. He went outside and rolled a cigarette. He wanted to get out of that room with its damned odors. He felt sort of sick inside. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

End of a Partnership

IT WAS two nights and a day before Buckshot Blue was back to normal. Bill had stayed with him during the worst part of his ravings, when he fought like a wild man to free himself, his eyes glassy, unseeing, his tongue bitten almost in two, his face a grayish green twisted in a distorted mask. There were times when his whole frame twitched and shook like a man taken down with chills. And all during this, Bill nursed him, relieved only by Wong. There was no use letting the cowboys or hay crew know what was going on. They stayed at the bunkhouse, a hundred yards away. Still they must have wondered at the noises that came from the house, at the groans, wild cursing and screams. Several of the hay crew drew their time. And Bill reckoned that they carried some damned queer tales to town with them. Bill had said a few words to the three cowboys. They'd savvy.

"Buck took on to much moonshine." Bill's grin told the rest. They grinned back. They were cowhands and savvied. Nor did they mention the fact that, by plumb accident, one of them had discovered, buried in the manure pile, the mutilated saddle with its silver conchos that Bill had hastily buried there, tied in a heavy canvas saddle sack. The saddle had been buried exactly as it had been found. Those cowboys thought a hell of a lot of Bill Benton—and of Buckshot Blue, when he wasn't too damned ornery while Bill was away. This wasn't Buckshot's first attack of D.T.'s. But they weren't squealing on Buck. That wasn't any part of their job. However, they were almighty glad that Bill was back. Bill had a way of grinning and passing over things and getting everything in shape.

When Buckshot came out of it, Bill untied the ropes and poured out two drinks. Then he put the pint bottle in his pocket. Buckshot, gaunt, hollow-eyed, unshaven, pulled back the covers and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Bill held out a stiff drink of whiskey.

"Throw it into you, pardner." Bill said. "You need it."

But Buckshot was shaking so that he couldn't hold the glass. Bill held it to the man's mouth. Some of the liquor

spilled, but still, most of it went down.

"I musta been damned snaky," Buckshot said, his voice warmed a little by the whiskey, "when I had to be tied down in bed."

Bill Benton grinned and filled his partner's glass again. It would take three big jolts, maybe four, to pull Buck out of the shakes.

"Get outside of this, Buck." Bill grinned. "We'll call it medicine."

Buckshot did not smile. This time he managed, without spilling too much, to raise the glass to his mouth. He sat on the edge of the bed, wearing a cotton nightshirt that came to his knees. Bill rolled and lit a cigarette, then handed it to Buckshot, who took it.

There was a long, awkward silence. Buckshot's nerves were getting steadier now. But he did not look at Bill. He kept looking out the window—looking without seeing anything. Bill poured him another drink and set it on the table.

"See you when you get feelin' better, Buck."

Buckshot did not answer. He did not even look at Bill as the latter left the room.

It was an hour later that Buckshot Blue came out on the big porch where Bill sat smoking, reading the *Western Livestock Journal*. He had shaved, nicking his jaw in several places, patching the cuts with bits of brown cigarette paper. He had on a clean shirt and overalls and his boots. He took one of the rawhide-seated chairs a little ways from Bill and stared almost unwinkingly towards the mountains.

From the alfalfa field below came the sound of a mowing machine. A meadowlark sang its evening song.

It was an awkward, tense silence that held the two men. Bill noticed that some of the color had come back into Buckshot's face. He wondered if Buck had been hitting a bottle which he had kept hidden somewhere. Drunks are like that, planting a pint or a quart to sober up on—keeping a hole card. He hoped Buck wasn't going to get ugly. The two sat there for fully half an hour. Finally Bill broke the silence that was getting unbearable.

"I have to go to town tomorrow, Buck. Anything I can fetch you back?"

"Not a damn thing." Buckshot's voice was flat, unfriendly.

"Have to deposit some money or I'd not be goin' in."

"Miles City winnin's?"

Buckshot and Bill, for the past many months, had never mentioned the money that Bill brought home from the contests. In fact, they only spoke of those shows when it became necessary.

"Miles City dinero." Bill spoke without taking his eyes from the distant mountains. "Not much, but it'll pay hay crew wages for a week or so."

"You made it. Keep it." Buckshot did not turn his head. His voice was on edge, unsteady.

Bill did not reply. Buckshot was in no state of mind to listen to reason. He made an effort to lighten the tension.

"Comin' up from the Rocky Point Crossin'," he said, "I had dinner at the Bacon ranch. Anne's goin' to teach the Moccasin school this winter. Some feller in the pen sent her a fancy horsehair bridle he'd made and she had it on that paint pony you gave her two years ago at the Rocky Point Christmas dance. She said to tell you . . ."

Buckshot Blue twisted out of his chair with a catlike leap. His fists were clenched. His black eyes, sunken, bloodshot, glittered like the eyes of an animal. He stood, long legs widespread, his face white, tense.

"Damn you, Benton, I've a mind to kill you!" he bellowed, his voice like the scrape of a file against granite.

BILL did not leave his chair. But every muscle in his body was taut. He was not afraid of Buskshot who, with his one

good arm, could hit like the kick of a mule. Nor was he afraid of the gun he noticed now for the first time, shoved in the waistband of the crippled cowboy's overalls. Then he watched Buckshot's eyes, eyes gone red, not quite sane—the eyes of a man who would kill.

"You go away to the shows," gritted Buckshot, "and have a hell of a good time. You, with your two good arms. You come back and brag about your money that you're throwin' into the jackpot. And me stuck here like a damned sheepherder. Alone. And you got the guts to come back and brag about pullin' down prize money. Tellin' me about Anne Bacon. Damn you, Benton. You and her!"

Buckshot suddenly turned and in three strides was across the porch. The screen door slammed behind him. He covered the distance between the house and the barn in long strides. Bill watched him go. And then out of the corner of his eye he saw old Wong, half hidden behind the living room door. In the hand of the old Chinese was a long-barreled six-shooter of ancient model. Wong slipped out of sight, the gun hidden in the sleeve of his black sateen Chinese blouse.

Bill rolled another cigarette. He watched the barn door. He reckoned that Buckshot would saddle up and head for Moccasin to get drunk once more. Then Buckshot Blue came riding out of the barn. But instead of taking the road to town, he came spurring up to the house. He jerked his horse to a sliding halt.

"When you see Anne Bacon," he called, "give her my best regards. I hope that spotted horse turns a somersault and cripples her like I got mine. And you can both go to hell!"

He rode away in a swirl of dust. Bill Benton looked after him until the dust cloud was hidden by the ridge beyond the corrals. He knew now that he had made a bad blunder by mentioning Anne's name. Buckshot, tall, handsome, proud, had won favor in the soft brown eyes of Anne Bacon. Like many another girl, she had been proud of his attentions. He had taken her to dances, given her presents of candy and little trinkets—and the pinto pony—though Anne Bacon had never given him more than a small kiss now and then when he left her after taking her home from a dance. Anne was not like most of the girls who fell for the handsome Buckshot Blue.

Bill could not blame Buckshot much for being so bitter now. He knew Buck, understood the fierce pride of the man. Buck had never let Anne Bacon or any other girl he knew see him with his bent, crippled arm. Only the painted girls of the Antlers knew him now. He shunned the company of girls like Anne Bacon.

Bill cursed himself for being a damned fool. Why had he brought up the name of Anne Bacon, knowing, as he did, the warped pride of the man who had once been termed the handsomest cowboy of them all? Now Buckshot Blue was riding away. Busting up their partnership, their friendship, riding, perhaps to hell, with a heart as heavy as lead. God only could know what would become of Buckshot Blue. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Bushwack Rumors

IT WAS after dark when Bill Benton rode into the little cow town of Moccasin. He put his horse in the barn and walked up the street to the Antlers.

Slick Arnold was dealing black jack. Doc was banking a stud game. Drake was lined up at the bar with Ike Skelton and Sid Purcell. Bill walked up to the stud game. The sallow-faced, cold-eyed Doc looked up at him with a thin smile.

"I'm lookin' for Buck. Where is he?"

Doc Arnold shuffled the deck of cards in his hands. His eyes, usually unreadable, held a glint of amusement.

"Have you tried the jail?"

"Meanin' what, Arnold?"

"Nothin'. And don't interrupt the game or I'll have the bouncer toss you out on your head. This ain't the Slash B, Benton. You're overmatched here. That door you used comin' in swings both ways. Use it. You're just as welcome as I was at the Slash B. Get to hell out."

Bill took in the situation at a glance. Slick had quit dealing and his right hand was hidden under his black alpaca dealer's coat. Slick always kept a short-barreled little gun under there. And at the bar stood Skelton, Purcell and Drake.

"A tinhorn like you," said Bill quietly, "always has the odds in his favor. A cold deck. Dealin' from the bottom. You never played anything but a brace game in your life. But it might be that I'll buck that brace game some day and your odds won't count."

He walked out of the place and down the street. He met a man or two and stopped them. "Seen Buck in town?" he asked.

But nobody had seen anything of Buckshot Blue.

Bill was in the post office getting his mail from the box when the familiar, soft-drawled voice of the old cattleman who owned the bank came over his shoulder.

"Hoped you'd be in before long, Bill."

Bill Benton looked up with a quick grin. Old Judge Burns had been a friend of his father's. One of the old pioneer bankers, a cattleman of the old school, and as honest as the Montana laws that he had enforced in the early days as a Vigilante.

"I come into town, sir," said Bill, "to have a little medicine talk with you. I want—"

"Come on over to the house, Bill. After bankin' hours, you know. Had supper?"

"Not yet."

"We're havin' Irish stew and dumplin's. It's the hired girl's night off. So we're havin' what we like. Just me and the missus. And I'm takin' you up to the house. When the hired girl gets a night off, we kind of celebrate with a mulligan stew and the fluffiest dumplin's you ever put under your belt. Whatever we got to talk about in the way of business, we'll take care of it later."

For the last time that day, Bill Benton asked that repeated question. "Is Buckshot Blue in town?"

Judge Burns hesitated a second. Then he spoke. He spoke without looking at Bill. Judge Burns was examining his mail, slitting open envelopes with the whetted blade of an old stock-knife.

"Ain't seen him this evenin', Bill. . . . Hmm. Now can you beat this, Bill, for damned orneriness? That's what it amounts to as near as I can tell." He handed Bill a circular put out by the government. It was a reward. The notice of a cash price on the head of a man named Jones, with half a dozen aliases. The man was a horse thief, a rustler, a killer.

But before Bill could get the complete description of the man, Judge Burns took it out of his hand and put it in his pocket.

AT THE HOME of Judge Burns, Bill Benton, in his overalls and flannel shirt and without a coat, was made welcome. Mrs. Burns had snow-white hair, a motherly smile and dark eyes.

It was a wonderful supper. Bill almost forgot why he had come to town. But after they had eaten, when Bill and Judge Burns sat in the banker's library, Bill broached the subject.

"I'd like to buy out Buckshot Blue's interest in the Slash B outfit, sir. I got seven hundred in cash on me. There's enough in the bank to buy Buck's half. Buck is a good man and all that, and I'll stake him to anything he wants, so far as I can, but I reckon it's time him and I divided the trail. Maybe you could sort of fix it up and give Buck his half of it. Buck's crippled and I won't quit him.

But things at the ranch ain't so good. I won't leave Buck in a tight, you understand. Only, the last few months, we don't see things like we did. I know how much he put into the outfit. I'll pay him back every dollar he laid on the line. Buckshot Blue and I are done."

There was a silence. A long silence. Judge Burns smoked his cigar. Then he looked at Bill Benton and shook his head.

"I hate to tell you, Bill, but you haven't enough money left to buy out Buckshot Blue. You and Blue had a joint account. He's checked on it to the limit. You'd better keep that seven hundred dollars you have in your pocket, son. Buckshot Blue has gambled your outfit away."

Bill was so startled he couldn't speak for a moment. Then the judge went on. "The bank," Burns explained, "has a mortgage on your ranch. A first mortgage."

"This seven hundred dollars," began Bill, "will—"

"Will stay in your pocket. When that mortgage comes due, which is about a month from now, I'll foreclose. The bank takes over the Slash B. That keeps Skelton and Purcell from getting it. My claim comes first. You can't sell so much as a calf. The mortgage covers all livestock. The bank practically owns your outfit. Buckshot Blue can't sign any of it away. He's overdrawn your account at the bank but he can't touch the stock or the land. I'm hiring you, Bill, to ramrod the outfit. I'll give you a chance to handle the cattle on shares. I'll stock that range as it should be stocked. I'll get hold of some government script and we'll get a permit to run cattle on the reservation. We'll lease some school sections and get a grazing permit on the Forest Reserve. The bank owns a few outfits that join your range. As a matter of fact, son, you'll be running one of the biggest outfits in Montana. You can ride up on Benton Butte, take a pair of field glasses, and look in every direction and you'll still be looking at Slash B range. In other words, you'll be getting back the outfit that Ben Benton lost in '86. But there won't be room on that range, big as it is, for Buckshot Blue."

"Then I reckon," said Bill slowly, "that lets me out, sir. I can't quit Buck in a tight. He's my pardner."

"He hasn't acted like one, Bill," the Judge said quietly.

"I can't quit him in a tight, Judge. I reckon you'll have to get somebody else to ramrod the outfit."

Bill spoke without anger. The older man bit the end off a cigar and lit it.

"You're a loyal friend, Bill. Tolerant, square. Very well, we'll not discuss Buckshot Blue. Hire him if you want him. Name your own salary. Buckshot Blue works for forty a month. That's more than he's worth to me. But if I had a guess coming, I'd say he's quit the country."

BILL BENTON went back to the ranch the next day. He knew that Buckshot Blue would not come back. And he thought a hell of a lot of Buck. No matter what men said about Buckshot Blue, to Bill he was all right. There at Miles City, Bill had talked to a doctor from back east. He had told this doctor about Buck's arm. And the doctor said that perhaps that shoulder could be made limber again. He'd spoken of the Mayos at Rochester and the Johns Hopkins clinic—of doctors who had performed miracles. Bill had fetched back that news to Buckshot but had been cheated out of the chance to spill it.

Now Buck was gone. Bill went ahead with the work. Weeks slipped past. The time came for the fall roundup to start. Judge Burns had made the Slash B into a big outfit, a well-stocked range with a big remuda of good horses. Bill had taken on many new cowboys, was running two roundup wagons and making the outfit pay. It was a man-sized job and Bill didn't

have much time to think about anything. Running a big cow outfit in Montana is not a job for a pilgrim or a lazy man.

"A man don't need a bed," said a bartender to a cowboy who was asking for a ranch job, "when he hires out to the Slash B. He'd better sell his bed and buy a box of matches. You ketch your circle horse about two hours before daylight, then have to strike a match to see if you've ketched the right horse. They pay top wages and they feed as good as the average outfit. But, by God, you earn your pay And no man is ever afoot when he steps up on a Slash B horse."

Buckshot Blue had disappeared. The Arnolds and the SP outfit had made a lot of ugly talk around town about Bill Benton—talk that spread across the country like a prairie fire.

Bill Benton was too busy running his outfit to hear much. The men he hired didn't talk to him about Buckshot Blue. And Bill hadn't been to town to pick up any range gossip.

The first he knew of the ugly rumors was when he pulled down into the badlands along the Missouri River with his roundup wagons. He shaved that evening and took a bath and put on clean clothes from his warsack. Then he rode over to the Bacon ranch. It was a small river ranch. For the past twenty years Major Bacon had had the store and post office there at the Bull Island Crossing. The old man with his peg leg had never been a major. As a matter of fact he had been quartermaster sergeant under General Miles. And, even though he liked to boast about it, no cannon ball or Indian arrow had lost him that leg which had been amputated at the knee. As a matter of truth, he had gotten drunk one night when he was stationed at old Fort Musselshell and had fallen in the river.

It was forty below zero that night and he had stepped into an air hole. He had enough whiskey inside him to keep him warm. So he had rolled into a convenient snowdrift and gone to sleep. And that leg that had been in the water up to his thigh, was frozen stiff in the morning. Because of his years in the service he had been given an honorable discharge and a pension. He had married a rancher's daughter, located at Bull Island crossing, and now lived the sort of life that would appeal to a retired quartermaster sergeant with twenty years of Army service behind him. Major Bacon liked his pipe, his jug, his reading and his three full meals a day. He read all the postcards and would hold letters against a strong light to see if he could make out the words of the letter enclosed inside the envelope. He had a Buffalo Bill goatee and mustache and wore his hair long. It was thick and a yellowish white and came to his shoulders. He spent his idle hours polishing his peg leg. His favorite topic of conversation was politics.

So it was from the rather garrulous Major Bacon that Bill Benton first heard the ugly sort of rumor concerning Buckshot Blue.

Bill was not wholly unprepared for bad news. Anne's welcome had not been exactly cordial. She had shaken hands with him. Told him to put up his horse, said that supper would be ready in half an hour. Anne kept house for her father. Her mother was dead. An Assiniboine squaw helped around the house.

Bill had found the major down on the river bank. He had just finished setting his trot-lines for catfish and was tying up his skiff to a tall cottonwood. The major shook hands, mopped the sweat from his red face with a blue bandanna handkerchief, then took a wicker-covered demijohn from a hollow log.

"Sit down, Bill, and let's have the news," he suggested. "Heard the bank closed you out."

"The bank owns the outfit now," Bill admitted. He choked a little as Major

Bacon's home-stilled moonshine burned his throat.

"Skelton and Purcell stopped by a few days ago," volunteered the major.

"They're workin' up the river about fifteen miles, so I heard. Gatherin' wild stuff they missed last fall," Bill said.

"They were asking about Buckshot Blue."

"That was damned thoughtful of them."

Major Bacon took a pull at his demijohn. He had a habit of shutting one eye in a quizzical manner, eyebrow cocked.

"I don't like Skelton or Purcell, either," he said slowly. "Never did. What business is it of theirs if you had a fight with Buckshot and kicked him off the ranch? What if Buckshot's horse was found dead on a sand bar below here, shot behind the shoulder and a bullet buried in the pommel of the saddle? When they hinted that you killed Buckshot, I up and told 'em that they lied. That's what I did."

CHAPTER FIVE

A Warrant for Bill Benton

MAJOR BACON, during his Army career, had borne the reputation of being the best guardhouse lawyer in the service. He knew the Articles of War backwards, knew the behavior of a soldier, the duties of an officer, military and civilian law. He had been broken a few times for minor offenses such as peddling whiskey, purloining canteen tickets, selling blankets and shoes and rations that rightfully belonged to the government that was paying him in cash and canteen tickets whatever was due him. He had grown fat when he was mess sergeant. Supply sergeants gave him all the clothes he could wear or hock. But, whether buck private or sergeant, he had constantly moved in and out of the guardhouse.

Once he had been a bugler. He claimed he had been bugler with the famous Seventh Cavalry and that the only reason he hadn't been with General Custer at the battle of the Little Big Horn was because he happened to be taken down with an attack of what the medico called laryngitis and he couldn't blow a damned note on the bugle. So he had been left behind and another soldier had blown that fatal charge that led the buckskin-shirted hero and his men to their last battle.

Major Bacon had told it all so many times that he'd come to believe it himself. There were those who claimed that he had talked his wife into an early grave.

But to Anne he was the man who could do no wrong. She mothered him. She listened to him. She washed his clothes, mended his socks, cooked his meals and made his bed. And when he had nibbled at the jug too freely, she would tuck him into bed, after unstrapping his polished wooden leg.

"They can't do a damn thing," Major Bacon went on to explain, starting in to skin a seven-pound catfish, "unless they find what the law calls the corpus delicti. Not a damn thing, understand? They got to have the corpse laid on the line. Damned tootin'. Not that I'm sayin' you done it, Bill. But I'm tellin' you your rights and how to stand up for 'em. Corpus delicti means the dead body of Buckshot Blue. They ain't found it. Skelton and Purcell ain't gatherin' wild cattle. They're huntin' for that corpus delicti. But I know this river. Know every whirlpool and undercurrent and snag and sandbar. I ketch catfish that know this river and I know how to bait a trot-line. If Buckshot was killed below here, where we found his horse dead, then his corpus delicti is twenty miles below, down below the narrows and buried in the sand ten foot deep."

He wandered right off the subject without taking a breath. "Now, son, take the day before the battle of the Little Big Horn. I was talkin' to General Custer's

brother Tom. Tom was talkin' about Bill Cody and Jim Bridger and Kit Carson and . . . Reminds me of that Injun-fightin' scout named Liver Eatin' Johnson. Now me and Liver Eatin' was workin' with a scoutin' party over into the Nez Perce country, when Chief Joseph was headin' for Four Buttes, not a day's horseback ride from here. At that time I was chief scout for Miles and I'm eatin' prairie dog stew and rattlesnake for dessert and washin' it down with alkali water and smokin' kinnikinnik Injun tobacco and talkin' sign language to the Gros Ventres, Assiniboines and Crows, to say nothin' of the Sarcees and Crees from Canada, when who in hell should ride up but . . ."

From the cabin the supper bell rang. Major Bacon took time to wipe off his wooden leg and pick up the wet gunny sack full of catfish. Then, conversation forgotten, he headed for the cabin and supper.

BILL got his horse and rode away. From the cabin he could hear the sound of the major's voice. He could hear Anne, too, and thought he heard her laugh once, but he couldn't make sure. It was getting dusk when he rode off into the gathering twilight. He didn't know whether Anne had watched him go, or not. The tipsy major had expected him to come to the house for supper. Instead, Bill had ridden away. It was after first guard time when he reached camp.

There was a huge coffee pot, filled with black coffee, simmering at the back of the stove. Pie made of dried apples and raisins, baking powder biscuits and cold meat. The roundup cook, an old-timer, cranky as hell, woke up. Bill sipped his coffee and swallowed big chunks of pie. The cook rolled a cigarette. He was baldheaded and had a walrus mustache. The cowboys called it a coffee strainer.

A roundup cook is supposed to know more than any cowboy about range gossip. And that supposition is usually the truth. He gets his news from the nighthawk, the horse wrangler, the grubline riders who want a meal, the reps from the other outfits. A roundup cook is something like a king. And any of them will tell the world, in language that would make a pirate or mule skinner blush for shame, that theirs is the lousiest job this side of hell. He will tell you about the sourdough keg that got turned over, or talk of the broncs they had to drive for a lead team and the wheelers who were always straddling the wagon tongue and pawing into the stretcher bars. And he'll go on into telling of bog holes and wagon pilots that don't know the country, of rainy nights when the lemon extract ran out because the damned wagon boss wouldn't order it by the case. He'd curse cowboys sitting on his bedroll and muddying up the mess tent of a rainy day, or a damned stove that won't draw with green wood and wet cowchips for fuel. And the knot-headed cowhands hollering for that suet pudding known from Texas to Montana as a son-of-a-gun in a sack. The life of a roundup cook, when the work is hard and the outfit is moving twice a day, is no sinecure. . . .

So Baldy's expression, as he came out from under his tarp and blinked while he fumbled for tobacco and papers, was far from being angelic. But Bill didn't notice.

"Baldy," he said, sipping his black coffee, "they're tellin' it around that I killed Buckshot Blue."

"So I heard," Baldy said. "And I told that damned SP rep that he lied like hell. I run him out of camp at supper time with a cleaver. Bill, there's a fresh pie hid under my slicker in the jockey box. Prune and raisins and apples. Somethin' brand new. Tie into it. And hell, you never killed Buckshot Blue. He ain't even dead. And there's some real butter to spread on that pie. The horse jingler stole it from a sheep camp. It's wrapped up in a dish towel and hid in under the can of axle

grease. Hell, no, you didn't kill Buckshot. He's plenty alive. Now let a man git back to sleep."

Bill ate his pie and went to bed. He knew that Baldy must be right about Buckshot. Otherwise he wouldn't have said anything. Baldy was like that. He prided himself that he never lied when he made a statement that would be labeled range gossip. Others, in the repetition of the tale, might twist or stretch the facts, but not so, old Baldy. So it was a cinch bet that Baldy's information was first hand. But Bill knew that it was no use to ask questions. Old Baldy would tell what he wanted to tell, but not another word beyond that.

EVEN though a man is innocent, it is unpleasant to know that he is being accused of an ugly crime. And Bill Benton knew that they were telling it around that he had murdered Buckshot Blue. Forgotten were the faults of Buck. The cow country thought him dead and they were remembering his virtues rather than his faults. Ike Skelton, Sid Purcell, the two Arnolds and Drake saw to that. And in the telling of it, many things were hinted.

Bill Benton was accused of butchering SP beef. A butcher of Moccasin who handled stolen meat had quit the country. Before he left he had said, there in the Antlers, that Bill Benton was to blame for it all. Purcell and Skelton had had the butcher arrested for buying stolen cattle. He had made a confession. Someone, for some reason, had gone the man's bail. The butcher had jumped bail, but behind him remained a sworn confession implicating Bill Benton and Buckshot Blue. But because Bill was alive and Buckshot believed dead, the blame was laid at Bill's door.

A hundred and one other stories were told, stories of violent quarrels between Bill and Buckshot, of hatred between the two partners. Anne Bacon's name was dragged into it. They liked to tell it that Bill Benton, after Buck had been crippled, had stolen Buck's girl. It was all damned ugly talk. And the sheriff of Moccasin, prodded by the insistent demands of Skelton and Purcell, backed by the butcher's confession, had headed for the Slash B ranch with a bench warrant for Bill Benton.

At the ranch, old Wong had not helped Bill's case. The little old Chinese had exploded like one of his firecrackers.

"You put Boss Billy in jail, Wong laise plenty hell. My boy all light. Buckshot Blue damn fool. No good. All time dlunk. All time call bad names. Cuss Wong all time. Big talk. Dlunk talk. Damn hell . . . damn hell . . ."

Wong talked some more, not sparing Buckshot Blue, and singing the praises of Bill Benton. And to make things worse, the sheriff found some bits of hide hidden in a haystack. Pieced together, these bits of hide made a P and S that fitted exactly into the holes of the hide which Skelton and Purcell had shown Bill. Drake and the two Arnolds were willing to testify that they had seen either Bill or Buckshot cache those bits of hide.

"It's time," blustered Ike Skelton, when he swore out the bench warrant for Bill Benton, "that the law done somethin' about this rustlin'. We're entitled to law protection. Fetch back Bill Benton, dead or alive. He's a rustler. And it looks like he killed Buckshot Blue. Fetch him in."

The sheriff was an old-timer who never acted on impulse. But he had his duty as a peace officer to perform. And the evidence was against Bill Benton.

But when the old-time sheriff finally reached the Slash B roundup wagon at the edge of the badlands, Bill Benton was not with the outfit. Nor could the law officer get any definite information from anyone there.

"Ask me no questions," snapped the old roundup cook, "and I'll tell you no lies. And if I figgered you'd harm Bill Benton,

I'd slip a bait of strychnine in your grub. You leave that boy plumb alone or this county will be needin' a new sheriff. One that can't be bought by crooks like Skelton and Purcell."

The sheriff, years before, had been wagon boss for the Slash B when Baldy had cooked for the outfit.

"This ain't any pleasure trip, Baldy," he tried to explain. "Bill's a damn good boy. I hate like hell to serve this bench warrant. But I got my oath of office to remember."

Baldy didn't argue. But he managed to feed the sheriff a bait of beans that had gone sour. The Mexican sauce on the beans took away the slightly sour taste. For forty-eight hours the sheriff was as sick as a poisoned wolf.

"You bin drinkin' bad whiskey," was old Baldy's unsympathetic comment as he listened to the sheriff's groans. "I'll fix you up a fuzee. Vinegar and sody and sugar and water. Kills the germs in this alkali water. In a few days you'll lose that green color in your face."

So Bill Benton had a forty-eight-hour start. And every Slash B cowboy was given his fill of suet pudding that Baldy now called "an SP man-in-the-sack."

The sheriff's illness was no joke. Sour beans are almost as bad as ptomaine poison—not fatal, but damned annoying and nauseating. And somehow during those days the bench warrant for Bill Benton got lost from the sheriff's warsack.

"Now ain't that just plain hell?" sympathized old Baldy. "You got to ride plumb back to Moccasin and have a new warrant swore out."

"Damn you, Baldy. This might cost me my job."

"Talk that over with Judge Burns, not Ike Skelton or Purcell," Baldy suggested. "And remember—every damn cowboy in this outfit is free, white, of age and entitled to a vote. No ringers. If it comes to a tight there won't be more than a handful of SP voters showin' up at election time."

CHAPTER SIX

A Gun for a Girl

BILL BENTON wrote a note to Judge Burns after he vanished, and left it where his old friend would be sure to find it. He couldn't go away without explaining.

> I never was a coyote in my life. But I got word the SP outfit is after me. I reckon you know that they are framing me. Just like they lied about Buckshot Blue. Ike Skelton and Sid Purcell are in with the Arnolds and Drake. Buck got cheated in that poker game. I hold nothing against him. But I'm telling you right now that Buckshot Blue never butchered an SP steer or any other critter that didn't wear the Slash B iron. They claim I killed Buck. I got reason to know that Buck ain't dead. I have to hide out for a spell because the law is after me. I'll show up when the sign

is right. Until then you just have to trust me and take my word for it that I ain't guilty.

The sheriff told Judge Burns about the bait of sour chilli beans. They chuckled over their watered whiskey about it. Both of them had punched cows together when Baldy cooked for the outfit.

"Looks to me, Judge, like they're framin' Bill Benton," said the sheriff. "Bill ain't a cow thief and he never killed Buckshot Blue." He lifted his drink.

"Of course Bill's innocent. And if you give him time he'll prove it."

"But I got to serve that bench warrant, Judge."

"Sure. But don't sweat your horse too hard."

The sheriff grinned, headed out on a trail he didn't want to follow. But Bill Benton, with a week's start, was not easy to find. Bill was doing a little detective work.

* * *

It was the dark of the moon and two hours before daylight when Bill Benton woke old Wong with a pebble tossed against the window of the Oriental's room.

"Damn hell . . . damn hell . . ."

The whiskers on Bill's face were getting longer. He had almost a beard now, and the hairy bristle brought a chuckle from old Wong. Bill grinned as they smoked together behind drawn window blinds.

"Now about this shootin' party, Wong," Bill asked, referring to that time so long ago when he'd returned from the last rodeo. "Doc and Slick Arnold come out to knock over some prairie chicken and ducks, they said. They had shotguns along that was never taken out of the leather cases. There was no game killed. But there was bloodstains on a tarp at the barn, and the tracks that led from where an SP beef was butchered were tracks that belonged to the buckboard belongin' to Drake. That .303 Savage rifle was used. Who in hell used that buckboard and that gun the night before I got home from Miles City?"

"Buckshot Blue," came the prompt reply.

"Wong, that's the first time you ever lied to me."

There was an awkward silence—almost unfriendly. Then Wong talked, his eyes unflinching. Buckshot had not taken the gun or the buckboard. Buckshot had been asleep, drunk or drugged, when Drake took the .303 Savage and had gone away with Doc Arnold about moonrise. They had washed the blood from their hands when they came back. They had left some bloody overalls and jumpers in the woodshed. And they had hidden the SP brands in the haystack. Wong had watched them —Wong, who hated Buckshot Blue as only a Chinese knows how to hate.

Bill Benton didn't reprimand Wong. He understood the fierce loyalty in the old Chinaman's heart and loved him for that devotion. He thanked Wong for coming honest, then rode back to the badlands.

SUNRISE found him squatted on his heels by the sandbar where Major Bacon always tied his skiff. He had not long to wait. The Major always took care of his trot-lines. This morning he looked the worse for wear. He had all the earmarks of an habitual inebriate with a hangover. His long hair needed combing and his peg leg was a little unsteady. He was trying to hum a half-forgotten song. And there was a six-shooter tucked in the waistband of his freshly laundered overalls. At sight of Bill, he halted with a jerk. His bleary eyes took on a look that might have been fear.

"It's you, Bill!"

"It's me, Major." Bill grinned. "Skelton and Purcell kept you up late. I watched 'em ride away before daylight. I hear that they are offerin' a bounty on

my scalp. That why you're packin' that cannon?"

"Why . . . no. No, Bill, of course not!"

"I'll need that skiff of yours," Bill went on. "And I'll need you. You know this river as well as any man does. I'm not a rustler. I didn't kill Buckshot Blue. Buckshot ain't even dead. I'm out to hang a few hides on the fence so that the cow country can read their brands. Either you can help me or you can keep on drinkin' your rotten moonshine with snakes like Ike Skelton and Sid Purcell. I'm goin' to find out what has become of Buckshot Blue. Are you lendin' a hand?"

"Of course, Bill. Naturally." The major pulled himself together. "You're damned right I'll lend a hand," he almost roared. "Now about last night, I just led 'em on. Let on like I'd play their game. But all the time, so help me, Pete, I was just leading 'em on. Never believed a word they said. Neither did Anne."

"We won't go into that," Bill said. "Get your oars and we'll take a little trip over to Bull Island."

"You're stayin' for breakfast, Bill," the major insisted. "Anne's makin' sourdough flapjacks and there'll be hot biscuits and catfish and a steak if you want it. Or eggs and bacon."

Bill shook his head. "I ate before I reached here. I'm huntin' Buckshot Blue and you're helpin' me. You and Anne think I killed him. By God, I'll prove you wrong or know why. And any time you feel lucky enough to try for that bounty money the SP outfit offers, go ahead. I'll take away your pop gun and feed it to your catfish. And so far as Anne is concerned, she—"

"Will answer for herself," came Anne's voice from behind. She was wearing moccasins and had made no noise. There was a .32 target pistol in her hand.

"I heard dad talking to someone," she said. "I was a little curious. So I came on down to the river."

"To collect the bounty on my scalp?" Bill grinned without a trace of humor.

"To protect my father." Anne's face was pale, save for a red flush across her cheekbones. "Father is not well."

"You believe what they say about me, Anne?" Bill asked bluntly. "You believe what Skelton and Purcell claim?"

"No."

"But you hate me for something."

"I wouldn't call it hatred."

"Then name it."

"Have you treated Buck fairly?"

"What do you think?"

"Only what everybody says," the girl answered. "And what Buck himself has said. That, because he was crippled and couldn't keep up his end, you wanted to get rid of him. Buckshot Blue, the cripple, was not welcome at the Slash B. You told him to get off the ranch and never come back. You abused him when he was ill and helpless. Your own men, men working at the ranch, heard him moaning and begging for mercy. And you wouldn't let anyone in the house but Wong, who hates Buck. That is what those men told in town. Can you deny the charges without lying?"

"Not if you're willin' to believe what a bunch of hay hands told when they got drunk," Bill said coldly.

"What do you want with my father?" the girl asked.

"I need a skiff and somebody that knows this river."

"The skiff is government property. It belongs to the Post Office Department. If you must get across the river, dad will take you over. But you can't come here and commandeer the boat and the services of a sick man."

Bill grinned a little, looking at the pistol in Anne's hand. His voice was an even, unhurried drawl.

"Buckshot Blue is somewhere near here. Mebbyso on one of the islands or back in the hills. He might be hurt or sick and be

needin' help. I'm huntin' him. He's my pardner. I'm takin' that rowboat, no matter who owns it. Put away that pea-shooter before it goes off and mebbyso punctures a hole in the skiff. And I need that boat mighty bad. I'm goin' to help my pardner Buckshot Blue."

Anne Bacon lowered her gun. Her lower lip was between her white, strong teeth. Then she spoke.

"I'm sorry, Bill. I had no right to say any of what I did. You're welcome to the boat. I'll go along, if you need me. Only this all has hurt me so much. Buck talked in town. He was bitter. Bill, I'll do all I can to pay you back for what I've said."

Bill smiled then, for the first time that morning. . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Dead Can't Talk

BULL ISLAND was about a half-mile long and in places nearly a quarter-mile wide. The high water each spring, when the ice and snow melted and tributary creeks that fed the Missouri poured muddy torrents into the river, always changed the shape of the island. It would build it here with mud and sand and water-logged snags, cutting it away in other places. For the most part the island was covered by dense brush of red willow and other thick growth. There were a few cottonwoods on the higher part. Years ago somebody had built a cabin, a barn and a round corral there. Probably the outlaws known as the Wild Bunch had used it for a hideaway. You had to know the river to swim to it from either bank. And during high water the place was inaccessible.

"It was at the lower end of the island," explained Major Bacon as he nosed the skiff into the sandy bank and Bill made the boat fast to a tree, "that we found Buckshot's dead horse, saddle and all. A bullet hole in the saddle. Blood dried on it. What was Buckshot Blue doin' on that island?"

"That's what I hope to find out. You say that the SP outfit were camped along the river. That they heard shootin' about dark one night and Ike Skelton and Purcell got you to take 'em to the island in the skiff the next mornin'. And you found the dead horse and the saddle. Any tracks around?"

"That's the odd part of it. Some boot tracks. Two-three barefoot tracks leadin' to the water's edge. That was all. The barefoot tracks wasn't the same size as the boot tracks."

"You stay here with the skiff, Major," Bill said as he climbed out. "I'm takin' a look around the island. I won't be back till late this afternoon. Keep out of sight. If anybody crosses over from the shore, or if you sight any man on the island, shoot three times."

Bill made his way through the thick brush. At times the going was almost impossible. Several times he used a short-handled axe to cut a trail through. He was winded and soaked with sweat when he finally reached the cabin in the middle of the island. Instead of crossing the short clearing to the cabin, Bill sat down behind some brush and waited. He waited nearly an hour, watching the cabin. But no sign of life came from there. To all appearances the place was deserted. But he wanted to make absolutely certain. This was a dangerous game he was playing.

He heard brush crack, across the clearing. His gun in his hand, Bill tensed. Then he grinned as a cow with a yearling showed. There were always a few head of wild cattle on the island, left stranded there when the ice broke up in the spring.

Bill watched the cow and yearling graze around the corral. The grass was hock high and thick. Then, for no apparent reason, the cow lifted her head, sniffed, whirled and quit the clearing, breaking brush, the yearling at her heels.

It was damned queer. . . .

BILL waited another half-hour. Then he risked the chance of being shot at and stepped out into the open, his six-shooter in his hand. He passed the corral and was almost to the cabin when he stopped with a jerk. There, ahead of him, not ten feet away, half hidden in the tall grass, was a high-crowned black hat. From beneath its wide brim showed hair and part of a man's face. And a long gun barrel caught the sunlight.

Bill Benton had the athlete's gift of acting before thought and split-second coordination of brain and muscle. He leaped forward, his six-shooter cocked, and landed, legs wide-spread, standing over the form of a dead man—a dead man with a gun in his hand.

There was no doubt about the man being dead. He lay in an awkward position, on his side. He had been shot in the chest and through the head. Blood smeared his bearded face and his rough clothes. His blue flannel shirt was faded and patched. His overalls had holes in them. His boots were patched, rusty. And his hair and beard were uncombed, matted, black, sprinkled thickly with white. Around his middle was a worn cartridge belt, every loop filled. The gun in his lifeless hand held five empty shells in the cylinder. It was a single-action Colt six-shooter, and the man had carried an empty chamber under the hammer to prevent accident.

He hadn't been dead long—not more than twenty-four hours—and was a stranger, as near as Bill could tell.

In the cabin Bill found blankets and grub and unwashed dishes, some blood-stained rags and bloodstained water in a tin wash basin. There was also a carbine and a belt filled with cartridges to fit the gun. Grub enough to last a month, and some old magazines and Montana newspapers. The signs said that the cabin had been occupied for quite a while.

Bill went back to the dead man. He carried the body into the cabin and examined it more closely. He washed the blood from the man's face. There was something familiar about the face of that dead man, something that made Bill wonder where he had known the man. The pockets of the dead man revealed nothing of value. Tobacco and papers, matches, a jackknife. Bill could find no marks of identification on his clothing. The hat was a Stetson purchased in El Paso, Texas. The old boots were Justin boots, made in Texas.

The man had dark gray eyes and a dark skin, and high cheekbones, as if he might have had a strain of Indian blood. . . .

Bill stared harder at the man's face. He covered the body with a blanket and rolled a cigarette.

"Shore queer," he mused aloud. "Shore queer. Same eyes, same nose, same kind of face as Buckshot. Only it ain't Buck, because he's got too much hair and whiskers and he ain't got a scar acrost his nose. But it's almighty queer, just the same."

It took several hours for Bill Benton to finish searching the island. The search proved barren. He ran into some wild cattle that stampeded at sight of him. He found some horse tracks, but no horses except Buckshot's dead mount, too badly decomposed to give any clues. Then he made his way up the shore of the island to the little inlet where he had left Major Bacon and the skiff.

There was no trace of the skiff when he got back. Bill swore under his breath. What in hell kind of a game was that peg-legged old whiskey maker trying to play, anyhow? Leaving a man stranded on Bull Island. . . .

Then his quick anger subsided. It wasn't like the old major to do a trick like that. Major Bacon had his little faults but he was not the sort of man to do a petty, underhanded trick. Bill, alarmed now, commenced a search.

It took him nearly half an hour to find

Major Bacon. The white-maned, goateed old soldier was tied hand and foot and gagged. He had a bad bruise on his head, behind his left ear, and he had been well hidden in the brush.

"I must have fell asleep," he confessed. "I was tuckered out from last night. Tuckered out. I had a few nips of likker and ate a snack. Laid down to ketch me a few minutes' sleep and I woke up like this—hogtied!"

"Who did it?" asked Bill.

"How the devil could I know, Bill? I was asleep. My head's splittin' wide open. Locate the jug. Then we'll get the skiff and get back home. I got a belly full of this island. I'm goin' home."

"Not unless you can swim, you ain't. The skiff is gone. We're afoot on the island. And there's a dead man at the cabin."

"Buckshot?"

"No. Not Buckshot. A stranger. There's been a gunfight on the island."

Major Bacon searched with shaking hands for his demijohn, but it was gone. There was the major's gun, just where he had left it, but the whiskey had been stolen.

"A whiskey thief," Bill said aloud. And he knew that about the only thing that Buckshot Blue would ever steal would be whiskey, when he was drunk and needed it. . . .

"THERE ain't a damn thing we can do," Bill told the major, "until dark. And then it will be up to you to earn some of the medals you have at home there in the glass cases in the whatnot. I'm goin' to leave you in charge of the island. You have a gun and plenty of cartridges. You can amuse yourself by listenin' to the hoot owls."

"You mean that—"

"That I'm swimming ashore when it gets dark," Bill said. "You stay here till I get back. If any man bothers you, kill him. If you get hungry, find your way to the cabin. You know where it is. You've been there. There are some of your empty jugs there. I didn't locate your still but I bet you have one on the island. Just the same as I know that Bull Island has been used to hide out men that were on the dodge. Skelton and Purcell know about this island. In the cabin I found some newspapers with their names on 'em, sent through the mail to the SP ranch, then fetched here to Bull island. Fetched in your skiff."

Major Bacon's face was a study. He was shaking like a man taken with chills and fever.

"Look here, young feller, you're making some damaging statements that lack any sort of proof. You can't—"

"I have all the proof I need," said Bill. "You've been paid plenty to ferry men to this island. The grub in that cabin is from your store. The soogans and blankets have your mark on 'em. I'm askin' no questions till I know the right answers. But when I do ask 'em, I want the truth. And I'll get it or I'll send you to the pen with the rest of the dirty crooks that take orders from the SP outfit. Now, have you got that straight, Major?"

There was something pathetic about the wilted dignity of the pseudo major. He seemed to get older in those few minutes. Fear and desperation showed in his eyes. The goatee on his chin quivered a little. His face looked gray.

"Bill, for God's sake . . ." His voice was a harsh whisper.

"Well?"

"I had no part in any murder, Bill!" The major was trembling. "I'll swear it on the Bible that was given me by my mother. I've brought grub and likker here to Bull Island. I admit that. Skelton and Purcell paid me well. I never asked them questions. I was afraid to. I needed the money. Anne had to have her schoolin.' We had to have grub and clothes.

Before God, I've never harmed a man, woman or child in my life. I took my skiff and fetched grub and a jug here. I left the stuff where they told me to leave it. Never once did I sight a human bein' on this island. I made my trips by the light of the moon. Skelton or Purcell would always pay me in cash. Double what the trip was worth. I didn't ask questions. God, Bill, if Anne suspected . . ."

"She won't if you string your bets with me," Bill said. "There's a dead man on this island. The man that killed him knocked you on the head and stole the skiff. I'm goin' after that killer. Even if it's Buckshot Blue, I'll get him. Your job is to stay here till I get back. Kill any man that looks like an enemy. And I'd be the last man on earth to hurt Anne by tellin' her that you're a crook."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Murder for a Price

BILL made a compact bundle of his clothes and fastened them to his back. Naked, he waded into the black water. When the current caught him he started swimming. He made no attempt to buck the current. Rather, he angled downstream, taking it easy, pulling hard when a whirlpool or undercurrent caught him. He was a strong swimmer and knew the tricks of the old Missouri. He had swum it countless times with and without a horse. He had crossed cattle at Bull Island and knew just what he was up against.

Behind, on the bank of the island, Major Bacon stood, peering into the darkness, trying to follow Bill's course. But it was too dark to see much. The old soldier stood there on the bank, his peg leg rooted in the sand. Every fiber, every nerve in his body craved a drink. Fear gripped his heart in a clammy clutch. But his thoughts were unselfish now. He was thinking of Anne. What if he were to be killed? What would become of Anne? Anne, for whom he had gone crooked. He hadn't ever wanted to turn a crooked hand. But poverty is an unscrupulous taskmaster.

"God forgive me," he kept saying in an undertone. And the swish-swash chuckling of the muddy river seemed to mock him. Stripped of his vanity, his false cloak, his beloved sham, he felt cold and miserable and alone, like a man stripped naked in a raw wind. He was alone. Alone with himself in the darkness.

A twig snapped somewhere behind him and he almost screamed aloud. Then his gun was gripped in clammy palms and he crouched, bathed in cold sweat. His heart pounded in his throat, almost choking him. Those sounds back there in the brush were furtive, cautious. Major Bacon had never in his life shot a gun in the direction of a man. He hated the thought of jerking the trigger, even as he grew nauseated at the thought of being shot. Wounded, killed, left to die alone in mortal agony—alone, without anyone to see—without Anne, whom he worshiped with a whole-hearted devotion.

Then he heard a man's harsh cough. The next instant Major Bacon was shouting at a man whose gun spewed fire.

Out there in the river, his ears filled with water, Bill Benton did not hear the sounds of gunfire. There was the deafening rush of swirling water in his ears. An ugly snag pulled him under, all but drowning him. He fought on desperately for the river bank. Then his feet touched ground and he crawled ashore on all fours, his sodden clothes weighting down his back.

He lay on the bank until he got back his wind. Then he twisted what water he could from his clothes and dressed. He stood there on the river bank, listening. Not a sound came from the island that was invisible in the darkness.

He had guessed his landing with better

accuracy than he had hoped for. It was less than three miles to an SP line camp. He struck out on foot. With decent luck he could steal a horse and saddle from the camp and get back to Major Bacon's place. There was an extra skiff there. He'd send somebody down to rescue the Major and bring away the dead man.

Blisters bothered his feet as his wet boots rubbed his feet raw. But he did not slacken his pace.

There was a light burning at the little line camp when he reached it. It showed at the log cabin, from behind the gunnysack blinds. There were two saddled horses in front of the cabin. Bill crept up under the blanketed window. From the inside came the sound of voices.

"I don't like this business a damned bit, Doc."

Bill stiffened. That was the heavy voice of Drake, the cattle buyer of unsavory reputation.

"You might not like it, Drake," sounded the flat voice of Doc Arnold, "but you'll play your cards like I tell you. You're into this too damned deep to back out. And lay off that damned booze. Who do you think you are, anyhow? Buckshot Blue? You know what booze did to him."

"But God, Doc, murder is murder. I don't want to kill a man that never harmed me."

"Quit whinin', and listen to what I'm saying," Doc Arnold snapped. "We got all the aces in the deck and the joker to boot. Buckshot Blue is dead. Bill Benton is on the dodge with a price on his head. That leaves only old Judge Burns. And up till now you've been cut into the easy money without doing a damned thing but look wise and get drunk. Your little chore is to kill Judge Burns. He'll be at the Slash B ranch tomorrow night. I'll see to that by sending a fake note from Bill Benton that'll fetch him on the double quick. You'll be there. You'll have a shotgun. You can't miss at ten-foot range, there at the barn. It'll be a cinch."

"By God, it's murder. I won't do it! I tell you, I'll see you in hell first!"

WHAT happened now took place in split-second time. Bill smashed the window with his six-shooter, then tore away the gunnysacking. Even as the blast of gunfire inside the cabin crashed in his ears. Bill ducked behind a small shed just as the door burst open and the burly Drake staggered outside, swaying like a drunken man. There was blood on his face and his gun arm dangled limply. He lurched toward the horses, stumbling.

Now, framed in the lighted doorway was Doc Arnold. There was a twisted grin on his face as he took aim at Drake's back.

Bill's shot spun the gambler around. His second shot knocked the killer's gun from his hand.

"That'll hold you, Arnold," he said softly. He ran over to the gambler, kicked the fallen gun beyond reach, then knocked Doc Arnold cold with the barrel of his gun. He called to the wounded cattle buyer.

"Come on back, Drake."

Drake, dazed, bewildered, stood swaying on his big legs, his face mottled. Bill led him back to the cabin. The big man was drunk. A bullet had grazed his head, partly stunning him. Doc Arnold's other bullet had broken the big man's arm near the elbow. Bill's smashing the window had spoiled Doc Arnold's aim, distracted his attention for that second.

Inside the cabin Bill Benton looked at Drake. He had never liked the crooked cattle buyer but he forgot his contempt for the man now. After all, Drake had risked death rather than do murder.

"Sit down and take it easy, Drake," he said. "I'll have you patched up as quick as I can. Where's the man that's supposed to stay here at the camp?"

"Over on the island," Drake mumbled.

"Skelton sent him over there. He's one of the SP gunmen. On guard over there."

"Guardin' what?" asked Bill quickly.

Drake's lips shut tightly.

"Better talk, Drake or I'll let you bleed to death," Bill said coldly. "I heard Doc Arnold proposition you. I know that you and the Arnolds and Skelton and Purcell are all in on a game to get the Slash B. You'll talk and talk the truth or I'll finish the job Doc Arnold started."

"God, Benton, they'll kill me if I talk!"

"I'll kill you if you don't. Where's Buckshot Blue?"

"Doc and Slick Arnold killed him at Bull Island," the cattle buyer confessed. "Killed his horse and him both. Buckshot knew too damn much. He knew that we were using the island. Old Major Bacon must have let something slip when he was drunk. Anyhow, Buckshot was fool enough to swim his horse across to the island about dark one night. They shot him and laid the killing on you. But they never found the body."

"Who killed that man over at the cabin on the island?"

"Doc and Slick."

"Why?"

"He's an outlaw. From Texas. Mixed up in some bank jobs and a train robbery. He had money. Some of it counterfeit currency. Some other stuff that needed careful passing. Somebody had give him Doc's name and tipped him off to the island. Slick and Doc have been passing this dangerous money for him on commission. But they held out on him and he was damn fool enough to make a gun play. He was fast but he overmatched himself. Tie my arm up, Benton. I'm bleedin' to death."

Bill tied up the wounded arm, then took care of Doc Arnold who had come to and lay on the floor, his ankles tied, helpless, sullen, defiant. He cursed Bill and Drake through gritted teeth. Drake looked frightened under the glare of the gambler's hard eyes. Bill grinned mirthlessly and went out.

At the barn Bill found a couple of saddle horses and a saddle. He put his prisoners on their horses and headed for Major Bacon's place.

"If either of you makes a break," said Bill, when they were started, "I'll kill you both. Now hit a lope."

CHAPTER NINE

A Man's Pardner

HE FOUND Anne there at the ranch. She looked white and her eyes were red as if she had been weeping. She met them at the barn, a 20-gauge shotgun in her hands. At sight of Bill, she lowered her gun.

Bill forced a faint grin. "Every time I show up here, you got me covered, Anne. Lock these two gents up and ride herd on 'em. They're bad medicine. If they get tough, shoot their legs off."

As the two wounded prisoners were dismounted, Anne whispered an anxious question. "Bill, where's father?"

Bill grinned. "Safe as if he was in jail. He's on Bull Island. Somebody stole the skiff and left us there. He likewise got off with the major's jug. So you'd better give me one to take along when I go back with the other skiff."

Bill tried to pass it off lightly. He made no mention of the dead man. "I swam ashore and captured these two roosters," he explained, "while they were in a pistol argument. Have a good mess of catfish for breakfast, Anne. The major is goin' to be hungry."

"Bill!" Anne's whisper was tense. She watched Drake and Doc Arnold who stood in the lantern light about twenty feet distant.

"What's the matter, Anne?"

"It's Buck," she said so softly he could hardly hear her. "He's been here and

gone. Bill, he's hurt. He looks like a scarecrow. His clothes are just rags and his face is caked with mud and dried blood and matted with whiskers. His eyes are sunken and bloodshot and almost insane. He wouldn't let me bandage his hurts. He wolfed some food and took Paint and a six-shooter and cartridges somebody had left here in payment of a debt. Then he rode away. Bill, I'm afraid. If the major is safe, then stay here."

"I'll not leave you alone," Bill said. "God, Anne, where do you suppose Buck headed for when he left here? Was he drunk?"

"No. He wouldn't take the whiskey I offered him. Said he'd never even smell of a bottle again."

"Did he say anything about where he'd come from?"

"He said he'd just come back from hell. He pointed towards the badlands."

"Then he didn't come in the skiff."

"No. From back in the hills. Bill, I'm afraid. Terribly afraid to stay here alone. Skelton and Purcell came here about dark. Ike Skelton was drunk and demanded whiskey. They acted queer when I said the major was not here. That he had taken the skiff. Sid Purcell asked if you had been here. I told him no and he called me a liar and called the major terrible names. Ike Skelton tried to manhandle me. I got away from him and got the shotgun you gave me. He laughed and said he'd be back."

"I won't leave you alone, Anne," Bill promised again.

They locked the prisoners in the cellar, then Bill did his best to quiet Anne's fears. "If I had my way," he said, his ears reddening, "I'd never leave you alone."

And somehow, neither of them knew just how, they were in each other's arms.

"It's been you all the time, Bill," the girl whispered. "Never Buck. But you'd never tell me you loved me. I thought you would if you saw Buck making a fuss over me. But you never did. . . ."

"Every girl fell for Buck," Bill said. "How was I to know you'd like me. And besides, Buck was my pardner."

"And still is, Bill!" croaked a voice from the doorway.

BILL and Anne, torn from each other's arms by that rasping interruption, stared at the man who stood there in the doorway. A scarecrow figure, ragged, fouled by muck and blood, unshaven, haggard, with eyes sunken into black bruised sockets. There was a gun in his hand—and on his face the ghastly grin of a man fresh from hell.

"I saw it all through the window," croaked Buckshot Blue. "I couldn't hear good but I saw. And I was goin' to kill you both. Until I caught the drift of what you two were sayin'. Now I know where I always stood. Anne, you're the finest girl I ever knew. Bill, you take care of her. And, Bill, I'm payin' off a debt to the SP outfit. Skelton and Purcell and the Arnolds and Drake, all tried to murder me but didn't shoot straight enough. Skelton and Purcell are due at Bull Island. They'll show up there before daylight. The sheriff is right behind me. He run into me at the roundup wagon. Old Baldy happened to get red pepper in the sheriff's eyes. Somebody else tripped him and I made a getaway. But the sheriff ain't far behind with a warrant for you on a framed-up butcherin' charge. Bill, I gambled our spread away but I never stole beef from the SP. Not to sell, anyhow. Baldy told me the whole deal. I got no time to lose. I'm after Skelton and Purcell and the others. They'll be at Bull Island tonight. We'll need the skiff. Where's the major?"

"At the island now," said Bill. "Buck, you stay here and get rested up."

"I got till daylight, maybe, to live," rasped Buckshot Blue. "The major on the island? Good God! Get the skiff!"

"Get it," said Anne, her lips white. "The extra skiff. I think I understand now the threats made by Skelton. Don't let them kill father."

"Get that skiff," Buckshot said. "Bull Island. Make it damn quick or they'll get the major like they got me. Like they got my brother that Judge Burns had a reward notice for. They think there's money planted there. And there's men that'll kill to keep it where it is. Purcell and Skelton and the Arnolds and Drake. Get goin', Bill. Every minute counts."

They were shoving the skiff off when the sheriff and Judge Burns rode up.

Bill called to them. "Stay here with Anne. You'll find Doc Arnold and Drake locked in the cellar. Me and Buckshot Blue are doin' some team tyin'. And we ain't wastin' loops."

With a grin that was reflected on the haggard, bearded face of Buckshot Blue, Bill Benton pulled into the black current to keep an appointment with danger—perhaps with death. . . .

"Team tyin'," said Buckshot Blue, as the skiff went down the river. "Our last job of team tyin', Bill." Buckshot hid his grimace of pain.

"Team tyin', Buck. We never lost."

"I been lousy, Bill. A drunken, damn fool sheepherder."

"You lie plenty, pardner."

"No time now to say much," Buckshot said. "Got to save my wind."

"The man they killed at Bull Island was your brother, Buck?" Bill asked.

"Yeah. Twin. Outlaw. Game, but no good. The sheriff had a description that fitted me. Wanted me, so he said at the camp this evenin', for bein' an outlaw. I told him different. He'll get proof of it when he sees the body of my brother. Bill, up till the time I got crippled. . . ."

"Quit talkin', Buck. We're edgin' close to the island. Sound carries."

"Team tyin', Bill?"

"Team tyin', Buck!"

"Pardners, Bill?"

"Pardners, Buck!"

Then they were on the island. There was a dead man on the sand bar. The dead man was Slick Arnold, his white face plain in the moonlight. And from a nearby clump of brush came the voice of Major Bacon, who was drunk as a hoot owl.

"A case of self-defense. And I met the attack as a soldier and a gentleman—with gunfire. Save for a few scratches from this brush, I have survived the gun battle unscarred. But the damned scoundrel sent a bullet through my peg leg that is a watermark—a badge—a distinction. . . ."

Then there came an interruption—gunfire.

The major saw a man in the moonlight, a scarecrow in rags, a blazing six-shooter in his hand. He saw another man. It looked like Bill Benton, standing beside

(Continued on page 92)

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ONE CAME BACK

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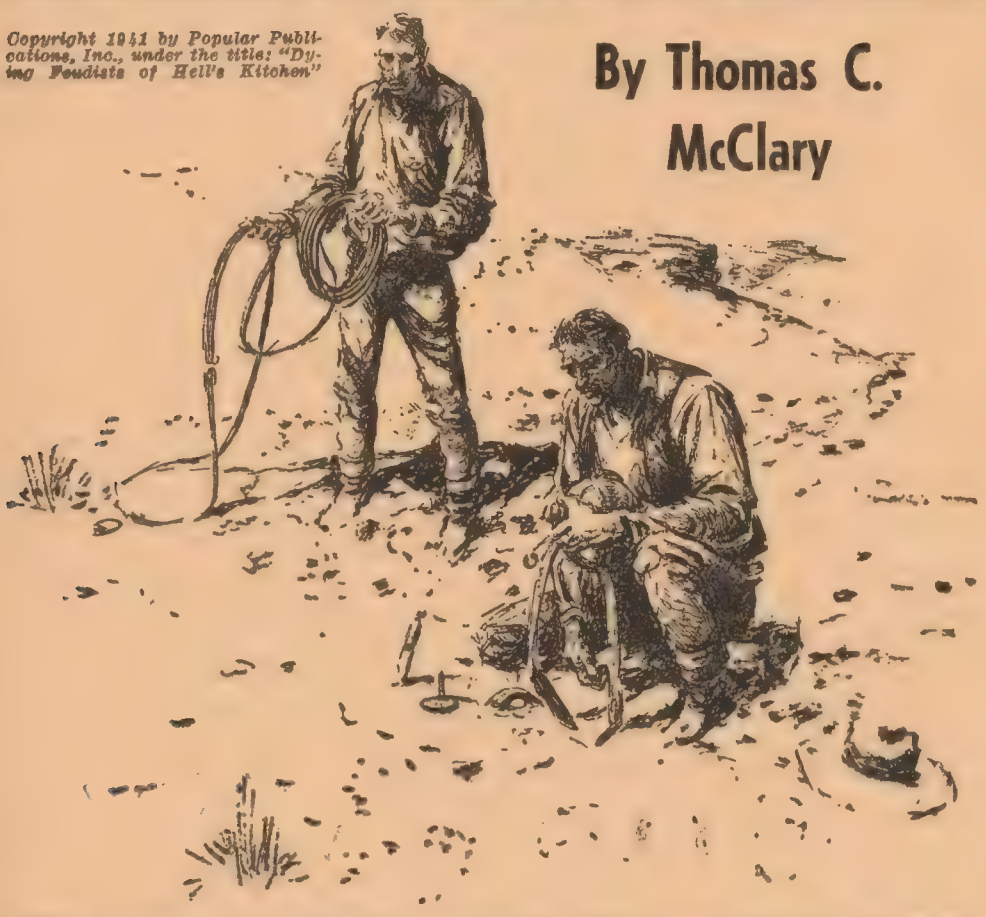
By Thomas C. McClary



"This is a compass of sorts, Tyson," Morgan explained. "But it only works while I'm alive."

Walking, staggering, crawling, his throat on fire, Morgan struggled through the burning sands of Hell's Kitchen—to kill the outlaw whose lariat was leading him to safety!

THE DAY before, the Sentinels had stood black and clear against the dun-colored hill behind. Now only bare corners of those two lava rocks showed above the gray sands that had piled against the hill. Beside one rock the hind legs of a horse stuck up out of the sand. They were stiff, and flayed of skin and flesh nearly to the bone.

Between the horse and the rock the sands began to move. For half a minute they were stirred by a violent commotion beneath. Then a man's head and shoulders appeared, and he lay there gasping, still half buried. After a time he laboriously pulled himself clear, and sat up on the rock.

He took a long pull from his canteen,

ripped clear the right arm of his shirt and struck a match to examine his arm. It was a mangled, useless mess. The shoulder was dislocated, the elbow open to the bone, the wrist sprained or snapped. His horse had done that in its last desperate fight against the storm.

Slowly a head emerged from behind the other rock. A man leaned across it on his arms, his head a solid shadow against the lesser, fading night beyond. He had a gun in his hand, and his eyes raked the other man's hips as the match flared.

"I mighta knowed it! Half o' Hell's Kitchen piled up atop your cache. But, by God, you got to come up kickin' and blowin'!"

The first man said nothing. He carefully wiped his mangled arm with a wet bandanna.

The other said meditatively, "I could plug yuh now, Morgan, and nobody'd ever know the difference. Nobody would ever know."

Morgan flicked him a glance. He said dryly, "You could if you'd had brains enough to hold a bullet. Your belt was empty ten minutes before the storm hit, Tyson."

"Comin' from you, that's funny!" Bat Tyson snarled. "I suppose the sand crawled off with yore gun?"

"Yeah. That's just what happened," Morgan nodded.

Tyson laughed angrily, then cursed. He climbed astride the other rock and sat there twirling the empty cylinder of his gun. He cursed again and sent the gun hurtling into space. He rolled a cigarette and lighted it. His eyes glowed red and brutal in the flare.

Morgan looked out at the dawn, and the bleakness of the desert waste was in his eyes. The storm had passed. But the light was filled with sand, and ugly. The dawn was a strip of molten lead across the gray shadows of the badlands. He could picture the utter desolation after the fury of the storm.

There had been no warning. His outfit had caught Tyson's rustlers at the river. The outlaw crew had shot clear and made an orange-stabbed trail out onto Hell's Kitchen. There had been nothing but the serene, star-washed night behind. Then, suddenly, that shrieking, raging wall of sand had moved at them out of the pall ahead. The rest of their outfits probably had been gobbled by the storm, beaten and battered and buried beneath a moving sea of sand. He and Tyson had hit those lone places of protection just before the full violence of the storm had struck.

HE GLANCED over at Tyson, a gigantic silhouette against the angry dawn. With each puff of the cigarette he could see the murder in his eyes. He watched him with a hatred just as cold as the outlaw's was animal and hot.

Tyson was spoiling for his blood. He knew it, and the fact filled him with a grim satisfaction. But right now, he'd have to handle him as best he could. He needed him. An ironic smile came to Morgan's mouth. He thought it was damned funny that two men who meant to kill each other would have to save each other now.

"You Morgans was always uppity about yer eddication," Tyson growled abruptly. "Let's see yer damned book learnin' get us out of here."

"Maybe it will," Morgan said levelly. "Come here and spring my arm in joint."

Tyson looked over at him, his eyes narrowing, filling with cunning lights. "You got a knife," he said.

"With a lock and a five-inch blade," Morgan agreed. "I aim to get out alive, Tyson."

"Then fix yore arm yourself!" Tyson said maliciously. He sat watching Morgan struggle with his bum arm. It finally snapped in place with an agonizing jerk.

Morgan winced and groaned with pain.

Tyson chuckled. "That don't rightly hurt yet," he said. "Wait till the sun's been on it a spell."

"That'll be bad for you, Tyson," Morgan gasped. "It'll take two of us to get out of here."

Tyson's rough laughter rolled out over the wastes. It ended in mid-note, and the silence flowed back like darkness and engulfed them. Shortly, he said, "We ain't goin' to get outta here, Goodyboy. Not afoot, with no trail and every landmark changed! We ain't goin' to do nothin' but make nice special buzzard bait."

"They'll sure get poisoned on you," Morgan said.

"That'll be after they finish you, Goodyboy. I'm tough, and I ain't got that arm. I aim to sit me down and watch the buzzards peck out yer yellow guts while yo're still crawlin'."

Morgan looked out at the horizon and watched the light change to an ugly yellow-red. Hell's Kitchen came out of its deep shadows. The storm had tossed the landscape around like so many toy blocks. It had scrubbed fresh sides on the pastel-striped hills and sheered off their tops. It had piled small mountains where there had never been anything but flats. The badlands had been treacherous before. Now they ran clear to the horizon, a frozen sea of sand without a former landmark.

Morgan's face was gaunt and grim. Unless he got Tyson in hand, the outlaw was liable to be right. He was viciously enjoying himself now, his eyes fired with savage mirth at each pain-wracked twitch of Morgan's arm. It would be different after thirst and the heart-breaking march afoot and the fierce heat had inflamed the sullen murder in him.

Morgan had seen and felt it before. It was always the same when two men hated. They could be walking with Death, and know it. But they'd stop with one foot in hell in order to kick the other man down first.

Tyson watched Morgan rub his arm tenderly, and saw him wince in pain. A cruel grin cut his brutal face. He stood up and stretched his powerful body against the angry sky. He jerked his head at Morgan's arm. "It'll broil," he chuckled. "Like hamburger on a griddle! It'll hurt like hell."

Morgan sat there watching the sun roll up, a ball of sullen red that climbed behind the browns and grays of dust. The first blast of heat rolled out of the day. They got their first clear view of the badlands. Tyson cursed.

"Get out of here, hell!" he said. "A sidewinder couldn't find his way out of this graveyard!"

"That only accounts for you."

Tyson's eyes narrowed, his nostrils flared. He turned suddenly and jumped to the sand between them. Morgan jammed his hand in his pocket. Tyson glared at him. But he had respect for a knife. He had seen Morgan slice up Pete Monte, no bad hand himself. He squatted suddenly on his haunches and began shucking out the few things he had in his pockets.

Morgan watched him. There was a pile of American folding money, some Mex gold. There was some tobacco left in his pouch, not much. A few cigarette papers, three or four matches, a lucky charm. Last, there was a shiny metal piece, the size of a dollar and slick as a mirror. Tyson squatted there, glaring at it and cursing. He had been stuck with that once for a silver dollar. Bat Tyson stuck by some two-bit crook! He drew back his arm to throw it into the desert.

Morgan said, "Wait! We can use that!"

Tyson wheeled and grinned coarsely. "What for, Goodyboy? To powder yore nose in?"

"I want it," Morgan repeated in a

steady voice. "I can use that coin."

Tyson's red-rimmed eyes narrowed with speculation. "What you got to give?" he demanded.

MORGAN laid out the contents of his pockets. A full sack of tobacco. A book of cigarette papers. A metal container of matches. A horseshoe nail. A piece of rawhide. The broken end of a small running brand. A stub of pencil and a frayed notebook. A watch.

"I'll swap ya," Tyson said. "Yore makings and the matches."

"Half," Morgan countered.

Tyson shrugged and circled his arm slowly. "It's worth more to see you go diggin' for it!"

"Your pot," Morgan growled. He shoved out the papers and tobacco with trembling fingers.

"Matches," Tyson said with a cunning look.

Morgan looked at him with a hard, level gaze. He didn't say a word. Tyson snorted and tossed over the disc. Morgan threw the matches to him.

He put the disc on his knee and began carefully to quarter lines across it with his knife. He made thirty-two lines, evenly spaced. He scraped the horseshoe nail clean and straight and thin, and notched it carefully. Then he made a small notch at the edge of the disc and fitted the nail on at an angle.

Morgan placed the broken running brand as flat as possible in the sand and poured one single drop of water on the solid middle. It began to move. His fingers juggled with the brand until the drop came back to center, and stayed still.

Tyson said derisively, "Ya shoulda been an Injun medicine man."

"In case you don't savvy," Morgan said, "I just leveled that brand." He placed the disc atop of this and pointed it carefully at the sun.

Tyson opened his mouth twice to speak, closed it, and pretended no curiosity. Morgan let him fret for a while. He looked up abruptly at the outlaw. "This is a compass of sorts, Tyson. But it only works while I'm alive."

The outlaw's face showed suspicion. "Malarkey! It's a trick to save yer hide!"

Morgan pointed over his shoulder. "That's due northeast. And that's the way we travel." He got to his feet. "Your horse is nearer the surface," he said. "Dig down and get your lariat."

"You giving me orders?" Tyson said harshly.

Morgan shrugged. "Suit yourself, friend. I can push on alone."

A queer expression came into Tyson's eyes. "If I find this is a trick. . . ."

Morgan looked straight at him. "I said, suit yourself."

Tyson watched him a moment, then cursed and turned around the rock to dig. He came back with the lariat.

Morgan got to his feet. "Let's roll," he said.

The outlaw stood stock-still. His legs were braced apart and he rocked gently on the balls of his feet. His eyes were narrow and suspicious. "If yuh figure I'm goin' to tote yuh when yuh give out, yo're loco!"

"The only need I've got of you, Tyson, is to handle one end of that rope."

"I don't know what yore figurin'," Tyson growled, "but ya had it figured out last night or ya'da shot me!"

Morgan, himself, wondered about that. He wondered why he had highballed the outlaw to those rocks instead of shooting him down, or letting him ride on to be gobbled up by the storm. He shook his head slowly, speaking half to himself. "No," he said, "I reckon I just wanted to see how tough you are when Old Nick's got hold one of your toes, Tyson."

"I'm tough enough!"

"We'll find out," Morgan said. He flicked a glance at the coiled rope over

Tyson's shoulder. "If that rope gets frisky, Tyson, you're going to get a belly full of knife."

"Yuh ain't scared, are ya?"

"No," Morgan snapped. He pivoted and started plodding into the dragging sands. . . .

The sun rolled higher and blasted like a furnace in the sky. The heat gripped and pulled at Morgan's arm. He had to walk half sidewise to keep that arm in the shade of his body. A groan ground out of him once.

Tyson's chuckle sounded behind him. He said, "I never been walkin' with a chunk o' cookin' meat before!" That crack struck him funny. He chuckled at intervals for a long time after.

Time passed slowly in that shimmering, brassy sea of sand. They stumbled ahead, bodies bent forward at the waist. The sky had become yellow fire. The heat writhed and danced across the endless, rounded hills and set them to burning.

Morgan was beginning to slow; the blazing fever in his arm sapped his strength and ability to think clearly. Once he turned back and caught the look of enjoyment in Tyson's red-rimmed eyes. The outlaw was trying to figure out things that might add to his torture. But as long as Tyson was enjoying the show, he was safe.

THEY stopped at intervals to take small, careful drinks of water. When they had to pass around hills, Morgan grabbed one end of the rope and they measured off the distance from their line of travel. It was mid-afternoon, and the sun had blistered their nerves raw when the outlaw finally rebelled.

He threw down the rope. "What the hell is this game?" he demanded sullenly. "You don't know where in hell we are. Like as not, we're walking straight up one of the ten-mile finger deserts off this badland!"

Morgan got out his contraption, shot the sun and did some figuring in his notebook. He added up one column of figures and subtracted another. He looked into Tyson's angry eyes. "We're traveling due northeast, and we're one mile and an eighth due east of our line."

Tyson stared at him. His temper was getting dangerous. He cursed, picked up the rope, measured off—and they plodded on.

At sunset, Morgan stumbled and sprawled into the hot shadow of a sandhill. He lay there, gasping with pain and fever, and listening to Tyson's chuckles. He spent precious water on his arm. The member was blotched and swollen purple now. The elbow had begun to fester and smell.

Evening clouds streamed across the sky. The red and purple and golden spokes of sunset rolled like giant wagon wheels across the sandhills. Suddenly the day was gone and stars washed across the darkening sky. The cool of night was a soft balm to Morgan's arm.

He fell into a troubled sleep, his mind full of Tyson and ways to keep him in hand another day. The pungent odor of a cigarette brought him bolt upright. The outlaw sat midway up a hill, staring at his shadow.

Morgan worked out his knife and the thong, sprung the blade, and lashed the knife to his good wrist. He fell back into a fevered sleep, thinking that at that moment he'd give his other arm for a drag of cigarette smoke.

Four other times Morgan came out of that heavy slumber, a sense of danger crawling along his neck. But Tyson was not even watching him. He was sitting atop a hill, staring out at the shifting shadows as the moon came up.

The moon hove overhead and the bright light brought Morgan completely awake. He sat up and stretched, and looked around for Tyson. There was no sign of

him or of the lariat. Morgan sat there with grim thoughts, that bare indefinable sound of crawling sands his only company. In time, there was another sound—the harsh, raw breathing of a spent man running. Tyson came staggering around a hill. He stopped and stared. Then he walked nearer and sat down and rolled a cigarette.

"Right handsome night for a walk," Morgan said.

"Thought I saw an antelope," Tyson rasped. His voice was steady and harsh. But his fingers shook as he lighted the cigarette.

Morgan put these small things together. He studied the line of Tyson's jaw, the small shifting lights in his eyes. Such things made up Morgan's world—the unconscious play of a man's hands, the way he stood, the shading of his idle comments, the gleam of an eye, a half-uttered word. These were the things that painted the pictures he wanted to know. And now he had the picture. Tyson was terrified of one thing. He was not afraid of dying. But he was afraid as hell of dying alone.

"There's enough light," Tyson said. "We could push on."

"Not so fast," Morgan answered. "We need some rest." He turned over and went back to sleep. He was safe now for the night. His arm was a painful throb that timed his slumber. . . .

They drank their last water at sun-up, Morgan saving a precious swallow to use for leveling his makeshift compass. Tyson's courage had come back with the sun. He laughed harshly at Morgan's hoarding.

"Goodyboy, yo're missin' the last drink ya'll ever know. We ain't goin' to get no place but thirst loco!"

"I aim to," Morgan said.

Tyson's eyes narrowed and filled with dangerous lights. His voice was raw and low. He asked, "Ya wouldn't be aimin' to try and dry-gulch me up one of them desert fingers?"

Morgan looked at him with grim contemplation. "It's an idea. It would save the trouble of shootin' you later."

Tyson's gaze went to Morgan's swollen, festering arm. He grinned suddenly, his eyes as malicious as a wild boar's. He leaned forward on his toes. "Goodyboy, yo're goin' to get so heat-crazy today ya'll go crawlin' off after some paint hill, thinkin' it's a river!"

"Maybe," Morgan agreed. "But it's going to be mighty lonely for you."

"Huh?"

"Dying out here alone, with not a damned thing for company but the twisting heat and burning hills. You'll feel how big this desert is before the devil gets your toe, Tyson."

"The same goes for you!"

Morgan laughed, "Not for me, friend. Another half day of sun on this arm, and I'll be loco with fever. I won't even know I'm crawling, see? I'll think I'm swimming in some cool mountain brook. There'll be cool shade and green grass leaning in the wind ahead."

"Not while I'm alive, ya won't die that way!" Tyson snarled. "I'll break ya in two and pull out yore joints one at a time first, Goodyboy!"

Morgan watched his eyes change from red to a hard, shining black, and his lips stretch out into a thin, cruel line. The outlaw stood with his legs just barely crooked at the knees. He was swaying slowly on the balls of his feet, and he stood with that peculiar quiet to his arms which Morgan knew so well. The quiet of a gunman or a snake before it strikes. . . .

MORGAN flipped his knife out of his gauntlet and slowly scraped the sand out of his nails. He felt the hatred and murder beating out of the outlaw in waves, and the answering response in himself. He had the wild thought that if he killed Tyson now he could have a smoke. But

it would end his chances of getting off the desert. End them forever.

It was the crazy thought of a fevered brain, and he quickly gained control of himself. He said, "We got a tough day, Tyson, if you can take it."

"If *I* can take it!" Tyson roared. It broke his mood, and he stood there with his raw laughter going out and being silenced by the desert. But the dangerous thing was still beneath the laughter. The dangerous, cruel and brutal thing that was scheming and figuring for the worst thing he could do to Morgan. They started out, abreast this time, through the dragging sands.

The sky turned from white to pink to shimmering cream, and then to molten yellow. The heat twisted and coiled around them with its searing flames. The sands grew burning hot. They burned through the leather of their boots and stabbed like fire when they fell. Their throats grew tight and full and aching.

Tyson cursed, and his mouth grew grim and set. Heat and thirst had burned the humor out of him. His soul was filled with one savage obsession: to see Morgan dead before he kicked his boots.

They stopped to test their line of march. The outlaw stood there, his eyes narrowed and leaden upon Morgan's arm. He gasped, "Not long now, Goodyboy! Not long and ya'll be crawlin'!"

He licked his lips. They were burned and cracked and dry. He watched Morgan pour out a drop of water to level the brand. His eyes came alight with a burning flame. From the angle of the canteen, he knew there was almost a full drink left.

He slipped the lariat off his shoulder, and stood silently twisting the rope and getting the circle wider. He whipped the rope higher for a throw. He waited for Morgan to cap the canteen.

The rancher did not look up. He mumbled dryly, "You'd be alone, Tyson. Like you were out there on the desert last night. You wouldn't like that, Tyson."

The noose dropped abruptly, kicked up sand, and was still. When Morgan turned there was a look on Tyson's face as if he would have cried with baffled rage if he'd had the tears. He looked shaken and gray beneath his tan. Was Kip Morgan, after all, more man than he, Bat Tyson?

"No, by God!" he gritted, and threw down the rope.

Morgan said evenly, "We've got to measure off. We get a quarter-mile out of the way and we'll die up one of those fingers, staring at wet country and never knowing it!"

"To hell with yore measures!" Tyson snarled. "We'll die anyway, Morgan!" The idea percolated in his brutish mind and brought back his cruel cunning. He said, "Ya can't measure alone."

"That's right," Morgan said.

"I'll trade ya," Tyson grinned. "I'll trade ya my measurin' for yer pants!"

MORGAN'S sun-blackened face tightened. Without covering, sunburn would kill a man in mere hours. Tyson waited, his nostrils pinched thin, a flat, ugly leer on his face. He chuckled. "Thought ya were so damned tough?"

Morgan's lips compressed. "You seen me throw a knife?"

The outlaw nodded, his eyes mean and crafty.

Morgan jerked his head. "Then don't let up on yore bargain, mister!" He took off his pants and stood, a ridiculous sight in shirt and vest and his long drawers, with his crippled arm and that crazy contraption in his hand.

Respect suddenly gone, Tyson gave a hoarse roar of derision, and darted for the knife Morgan had stuck into the sand. But Morgan had the rawhide thong on his wrist. He snapped the knife clear, kicking sand in Tyson's face.

The outlaw got up cursing. The veins on his forehead were black. His voice

came wild and cracked and murderous. "Ya don't know where the hell we are! Yo're scared, Goodyboy, and tryin' to save yore hide! But, by God, I'll see the buzzards at ya yet!"

He drew back like a maddened wolf, fangs bared, lips snarling, his big head and shoulders hunched forward. But his blazing eyes were on the knife.

Morgan moved the knife slowly, so that it flashed silver in the sun. He watched

"All right, Morgan," he growled, "I made a bargain an' I'll stick to it."

Tyson begin to quiet down. But he knew the signs. Before long, not even the threat of the knife would hold the outlaw. And Morgan himself could not hold out much longer. He was weak and giddy with a rocketing fever. He had to fight himself to keep murder from his own mind.

The two men stood there under the broiling sun. They eyed each other with hatred, one's face twisted with murder-craze, the other's with pain. Tyson's eyes were red and brutal and glaring.

They stood like that a full minute, their breathing hard and wheezing, and only the soft sound of the creeping sands between. Tyson cursed.

"All right, Morgan!" he growled. "I made a bargain an' I'll stick to it! But that ain't got nothin' to do with how I hate ya!"

He picked up the end of the rope and walked out to measure. A cold smile mixed with the pain on Morgan's purple, swollen lips. He was still master. Tyson would get him to wet country somehow if he had to make the outlaw carry him.

Tyson came back with the measure and tossed away Morgan's pants. They plodded on. The heat had burned through Morgan's clothes before. It scorched like an oven now. His whole body was a blazing, shooting mass of pain. His breath was coming in wracking gasps. The outlaw watched him with venomous eyes.

The sun came almost overhead and smashed at them with its full force. They took the last compass sight they could get for two full hours. The contraption wavered in front of Morgan's eyes. He had to force the fever from his brain to read it. There was some figuring to do, and his hand moved the pencil in jerky motions.

Tyson watched him with raw hatred. He eyed the canteen, still holding nearly a full drink of water. Squatting on his haunches, he edged closer.

Morgan flipped the knife into the sand beneath his hand. "Never mind that water, Tyson!" he choked.

"So ya still got fight!" Tyson growled.

Morgan finished his figuring. He did not look at the other man, but it did no good. Tyson could read the signs of fever. Morgan was shot.

Morgan said huskily, dragging the words through his thick mouth, "We ought to be near the desert rim. The stage road runs almost on the rim for a piece. Right where it twists into the mesa there's a spring."

"Sure!" Tyson gritted. "That's what they all look for when they're lost out here, Goodyboy! And yuh know what they find? They find a nice row of white bones up Snake Finger desert, on account of they don't hit the mesa rim. They always miss the rim."

"We won't miss it," Morgan rasped "We'll hit it by sundown, but you got to

(Continued on page 93)

PEACEFUL MAN

Old Ben Prophet's throat was dry as trail dust when he stepped into the pool hall, and his hand trembled on his old Colt. "Miller," he said, "you made enough trouble around here. Leave town. Get out—or I'll kill you!"

CHAPTER ONE

Advisin' Man

ALL the Birdstone country said that Ben Prophet was without fear, and that he had no sentiment. There were other comments on the owner of the Screwplate Ranch, but these were the most important of what was said.

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Compelling Frontier Novelette

—WITH A GUN!

By Bennett Foster

A muscle quivered at the corner of Ben's mouth, and his hand lifted toward his Colt.

The women, assembled at Mrs. Harvey McCulloghs, gathered around the square quilting frame and, with busily dipping needles, damned the sentimental side of Ben Prophet's existence. Or rather, the non-sentimental side.

The men, warming their hands in the back room of Noonan's meat market, listened to the wood crackling in the pot-belly of the stove and recalled the day that Ben Prophet, working as a rider for old Hi Metcalf, had trailed and found ten head of Gunhammer horses and the two thieves who had stolen them.

Spitting accurately at the stove, old Doc Botkin completed the story although all present had heard it many times.

"He came to town," Doc said. "He had the horse thieves in a wagon an' they weren't any use to nobody. Ben had walked right into the cabin an' those two had tried to do business with him and when it wound up they were shot aplenty. Ben was hit but not so bad that he couldn't bring them and the horses in."

And, having concluded the epic, old Doc Botkin, who was a Democrat as well as a physician, would look around the circle and complete his statement.

"We'll run him for sheriff on the Democratic ticket one of these days," Doc would say.

The Birdstone, being cattle country, was firm in its beliefs; and no one—not even Hi Metcalf, patriarch of the Birdstone and court of last appeal—could change its mind. But Hi Metcalf knew Ben Prophet and he knew that the Birdstone was wrong. Ben Prophet was a coward, and he was as full of sentiment as a woman with her first grandchild.

Hi Metcalf and Mary Prophet might have set the Birdstone right concerning the hard-twisted, fifty-year-old cowman who owned the Screwplate, but Metcalf did not think it was worth the effort, and Mary Prophet was as tongue-tied and shy as her husband.

HI METCALF ate dinner at the Screwplate the second Sunday in July. When the meal was done and Mary Prophet was washing the dishes, Metcalf and Ben Prophet repaired to the vine-covered front porch, there to smoke and talk and let the good roast beef and mashed potatoes fulfill their duty.

To them, as they sat content, came young Wayne Prophet, twenty-one years old and a fine, upstanding, square-shouldered lad.

"Dad?" said Wayne.

Ben Prophet turned his head.

"I want to go into town and get the mail," Wayne said.

Ben Prophet thought that over, just as he thought over any idea that was offered him. Presently he nodded.

"All right, Wayne. You take Headlight. He's in the east corner of the horse pasture. Put some of that powder on his back—there's a setfast comin' there if you ain't careful—an' when you saddle him don't pull your cinch too tight."

Wayne turned away and Ben halted him.

"Go in by the Latimore place," Ben continued. "Somebody said that the Childress kids had the measles, an' be sure to close the east gate when you go through. An' Wayne—"

"Yes, Dad," said Wayne Prophet patiently.

"Don't forget to tell your mother goodbye an' where you're going," Ben Prophet completed. "An' come right back from town."

Boot-heels thumped on the steps as Wayne Prophet turned away, and Ben Prophet listened to the sound of his son's departing steps. Hi Metcalf blew smoke from his cigar.

There was quiet on the porch and a kingbird that had nested in the vines came fluttering in with a grasshopper in his beak. The sun was warm and the sky was blue and a cloud floated across it like

a fluffy white tuft from a cottonwood. In the kitchen the dishes rattled as Mary Prophet put them away. Old Hi Metcalf cleared his throat.

"You know, Ben," said Hi Metcalf, "that's why I fired you."

"Huh?" Ben Prophet pulled down his feet from the porch railing and shot a surprised look at his friend.

Metcalf nodded so that his white beard wagged like the beard of an aged goat, and his blue eyes were bright and keen as he met Ben Prophet's startled glance. "That's why," Metsalf repeated, "when I made you foreman I couldn't keep a rider. So I fired you."

"Why . . . ." said Ben Prophet, his astonishment plain in his voice. "Why, Hi . . . ."

"You never cut 'em loose," Metcalf continued. "You knew cattle, Ben, an' you knew horses an' you knew cow work. But you didn't know your men."

Ben Prophet bristled a little. "I don't—" he began.

Metcalf went on, interrupting Prophet, his voice an unhurried drawl coming through his white beard. "Every time you had a bunch of cows to move you told your crew just where to go an' how to get there," he explained. "Every time there was anything to do you figured it out down to the last whisper, an' you told the boys. A cowpuncher ain't a baby, Ben. They got some sense. It was either you or the crew, so I had to set you up in the cow business."

Ben Prophet digested that and Metcalf smoked and watched the cloud and listened to the kingbirds. "You needn't have told the kid to close the gate," Metcalf said. "Give him credit for a little sense, Ben. You've cattle in your east pasture."

From out by the corral came the steady beat of a horse's hoofs. Young Wayne Prophet, riding bay Headlight, appeared around the corner of the house and lifted his hand as he swung off to the east, taking the longer way to town because the Childress kids had the measles. Ben Prophet's gray eyes followed his boy, and Hi Metcalf puffed on his cigar and then searched for a match because the cigar was dead.

"He's just a kid," Ben said.

"He's a grown-up man," Metcalf replied. "Do you tell him what clothes to wear?"

Ben Prophet flinched. Just that morning he had told Wayne to put on an undershirt when the boy had come out into the kitchen, his strong young torso bare.

"He's a grown-up man," Hi Metcalf said again, "an' he's sweet on Nancy Archibald."

"He's no such thing!" Ben declared hastily. "He ain't nothin' but a kid." And then his fright plain in his voice, "How do you know he's sweet on Nancy?"

"Watch 'em together some time," grunted Hi Metcalf.

IN THE VINES the kingbirds fluttered about their nest. Mary Prophet came out on the porch and put her work-worn hand on her husband's shoulder. Because of habit and because Hi Metcalf was there, Ben Prophet withdrew from beneath that hand.

Mary Prophet turned away and walked back into the house to get her mending, and Metcalf spoke again, apparently changing the subject but in reality cleaving to it.

"Vance Miller is in Birdstone again," Metcalf said.

Prophet looked sharply at his friend, but Metcalf's face was as unreadable as the slope of Calico Mesa off to the north.

"Some of the boys think Vance is kind of a hero," drawled Hi Metcalf. "Bein' sent up for manslaughter didn't hurt his reputation to speak of."

"So?" Ben Prophet said.

Metcalf nodded his wise white head. "Wayne used to think quite a lot of Vance," the old man drawled, "before

Vance went into town and got into that trouble. Didn't they run together quite a lot?"

"Some," Prophet agreed, his voice dry as his tightening throat, "when Vance worked for Archibald. I told Wayne to stay away from Vance. Made him quit runnin' with him."

Metcalf hummed deeply in his throat, a questioning sound, and Prophet amplified his statement: "Vance wouldn't do an honest day's work. He'd ruther get a livin' some other way."

Mary returned, carrying her mending basket, and settled down beside her husband. Ben Prophet was lost in thought, and Metcalf, his cigar burned down so that it had become a threat to his white mustache, grunted and unlocked his hands from his rounded middle and got to his feet.

"I've got to go back home," Metcalf announced. "That was a mighty fine dinner, Mary. I'll come again some time if you'll invite me."

"Of course," Mary said placidly. "You're always welcome, Mr. Metcalf."

Hi Metcalf made his departure, his old buckboard rattling out through the gate. Prophet, walking back from the gate, looked at his wife sitting there on the porch and came up the steps and joined her. There was no conversation between the two. No conversation was needed.

Ben settled down in the chair beside his wife, his eyes troubled. Mary's needle flashed back and forth as she patched a pair of Wayne's levis, the bold thimble that Ben had brought her from Omaha pushing the needle home with each succession of fine stitches.

In the vines the kingbirds were unwontedly active. Ben Prophet's mind was a turmoil of mixed emotions, and his mouth was hot and dry, with his tongue sticking to the roof; for Ben Prophet was afraid.

Vance Miller was back in Birdstone, Miller with the flashing black eyes and the smooth black hair. Miller who had killed a man in a fight on Birdstone's street and had been sent to the penitentiary for five years on the charge of manslaughter.

Ben Prophet knew the attraction that a man like Miller could be to a youngster. He knew that Miller would grin and buy a drink, that he would play poker, winning flashingly. He knew that Miller was attractive and he knew that Miller would be surrounded by the youngsters of the Birdstone country. Ben Prophet knew; he had been there.

The thimble glinted and the needle slipped smoothly into the blue denim and out again, and Ben Prophet's mind went back through the years, back to a day when he had worshiped a man like Vance Miller, had followed him, had counted him a friend.

Bill Long had been that other Vance Miller—a Texas man with a reckless light in his eyes and a devil-may-care grin. Prophet had counted Bill Long a friend, had ridden stirrup to stirrup with him, had listened to the man and been led by him.

Prophet's eyes were bitter as he remembered a day in a courtroom when the judge had said, "I will suspend this sentence because of your age, Benjamin Prophet, and I parole you to Hiram Metcalf...."

Bill Long had turned away then, laughing, and walked out of the courtroom, and Hi Metcalf had put his hand on Ben Prophet's shoulder. That had been a bitter day, for Bill Long had made the plan and reaped the profits, and Ben had been left to hold the sack.

Bill Long . . . Vance Miller. Dangerous men for a boy to be around, dangerous then and dangerous now. Ben half moved his hand, reaching out toward his wife, and then lowered it again; for Ben Prophet was a man who dared not risk a sentimental gesture.

IN THE VINES the kingbirds chattered furiously. The male bird, crest erect, darted out, and following the flight of the bird Ben saw a hawk circling slowly above the cottonwoods that skirted the yard.

The hawk was big-winged and harmless enough, but clicking his battle cry the kingbird mounted up and up, and now the female followed him.

The hawk was taken by surprise. A gray lightning bolt descended from the sky and struck him. Another bolt from the blue swept in to attack from the side. Surprised, the hawk fought back momentarily, beating his big wings, sweeping in a circle.

Down darted the kingbird, up swept the kingbird's mate. A feather floated down; and then, in full retreat, the hawk's wings beat frantically and, with the kingbirds in hot pursuit, the great bird sailed away and was lost behind the cottonwoods.

Ben Prophet shook his head. He had never seen the kingbirds so excited.

Presently the birds returned, the male's crest erect, his clicking call triumphant, the female fully as elated as her mate. They settled in the vines, close beside the nest, and seemed to speak with each other. For a time that consultation continued; then the female hopped up on the nest, the male following her. Ben watched them.

The kingbirds had a project in mind; that was apparent. From the nest the parent birds, one by one, expelled their young until three small birds, full-feathered but with the yellow mark of youth upon their beaks, were perched precariously upon a thick branch of the vine.

The male bird took a short flight and returned. The female also set an example. The young ones hung on, their claws wrapped desperately about the stout vine. Again and yet again the parent birds sallied out and returned, clicking their calls, urging their young ones to a like attempt. To no avail. The fledglings clung to safety, desperately refusing to fly.

And now, obviously weary and impatient, the male bird pushed one of his offspring from that safe perch. The little fellow flapped frantically, teetered on the vine, caught and lost his balance—and finally, falling toward the ground, spread his wings.

And a miracle happened: the young bird flew, sailed out and settled to safety.

Ben Prophet watched the show. He saw the terror, the struggle and the flight. On the ground the fledgling collected himself. Presently he hopped a tentative inch or two. Then he spread his wings. And then, crest lifted, he hopped again and beat his wings and flew.

Ben Prophet got up from his creaking rawhide chair. "I'm goin' out to the corral, Mary," he said, and crossing the porch, touched his wife upon the cheek and went on down the steps. Mary's eyes were bright as she watched him go. Ben had been perturbed, she knew, but now he had settled something in his mind. She folded the neatly patched levis and put them down beside her.

Out by the corral Ben took a grip on the top bar and looked into the pen. There were three colts there that he had been gentling. They needed riding and Ben had thought to supply that need in the morning.

Now he shook his head and watched the colts stampede across the corral. In the morning, Ben thought, Wayne could try his hand at the colts.

CHAPTER TWO

"Get Out of Town!"

WAYNE was pleased when the following morning his father told him to try a saddle at the colts. Wayne had ridden horses all his life, but never before a bronc.

Ben Prophet stood by, sweating, while

the boy went at his riding. Nor could Ben break the habit of a lifetime. He told Wayne just how to saddle the first colt and how to mount and how to sit him. Wayne rode the sorrel, never letting the horse pitch, and climbed down after the ride, well pleased with himself.

The second colt, a bay, was as easy as the first had been; and Wayne perhaps grew a little contemptuous. But the third was a different story.

The third colt was a *bayo-coyote* with the devil's cross marking his dun shoulders, and smoky black stockings on his buckskin legs. The third colt would in time make the best horse of the three; but just before dinner he threw Wayne Prophet high, wide and handsome, and pitched off across the round corral, trying to get rid of the saddle that clung, burr-like, to his back.

Dizzily Wayne got to his feet and took a staggering step or two after the colt, but Ben forestalled him.

"Let him go," ordered Ben sharply. "You go to the house an' lie down. He throwed you on your head!" Ben Prophet could not, with one clean cut, push his fledgling from the bough.

Obediently Wayne went to the house. Ben caught the dun colt, pulled off the saddle and turned the horse out. When Ben came in for dinner Wayne was lying down with a headache.

But that afternoon, while Ben was in the east pasture, riding the short stretch of bog, the boy went to town without permission or by your leave. He was home again for supper, a late meal served when the July sun was down and eaten by lamplight. There was a heavy odor of cloves on Wayne's breath and Ben watched the boy.

The week went past with Ben giving orders and Wayne obeying them. At the end of the week the kingbirds, young and old, were catching flies in the yard, the youngsters as alert and clever as their elders. At the end of the week Wayne had ridden the bay and sorrel colts but had not tried his saddle at the buckskin again.

On Friday Ben Prophet went to town.

In Birdstone, to those who spoke to him, Ben made reply in kind. He transacted his business with Carl Brill at the bank, and he got the mail, and he bought the few things that Mary had requested at Braker's store.

It was in Braker's store, with Tom Sutcliffe, the justice of the peace, and Lon Archibald, Ben's neighbor, that Ben Prophet saw a disturbing sight. He saw Nancy Archibald, dark and sparkling-eyed, pass by with Vance Miller. Miller was laughing, and he held his hand familiarly on Nancy's arm, and Lon Archibald snapped a curse and started toward the door. Tom Sutcliffe stopped the ranchman.

"Don't be a fool, Lon," Sutcliffe said.

"I won't have it." Archibald, a hot-tempered man, jerked his arm from Sutcliffe's grasp. "My girl goin' around with—"

"It'll be worse if you tell her not to," said Sutcliffe, who was fat and wise in the ways of human beings. "An', Lon, you got no business goin' up against Vance Miller. He killed a man, remember?"

Archibald was no coward, he had never been so accused; but at the reminder, he stopped short in his stride. All Birdstone remembered that Vance Miller had killed a man. Lon Archibald remembered, too. "I tell you I won't have it!" he fumed to Tom Sutcliffe, but he leaned back against Braker's counter even as he said the words.

Ben Prophet completed his purchases and took them on out and tied them to the saddle. All the way back to the Screw-plate he remembered Vance Miller's lean, sharp face and Nancy Archibald's laughter. He remembered, too, the thing that Hi Metcalf had said:

"Wayne's sweet on Nancy Archibald."

Back at home, silently eating supper with Mary across the table from him, and between them Wayne, young and full-faced and brown, stowing away the steak and potatoes, Ben Prophet watched his son's face.

"I'll turn in early," said Ben Prophet. "I've got a day's work tomorrow."

DESPITE his announcement, Ben Prophet did not sleep that night. He turned and tossed, keeping Mary awake beside him; and at five o'clock he was up and dressing, calling for Wayne.

The boy came, sleepy-eyed, and went out to wrangle the horses while Ben did the other chores. But when breakfast was finished, the day's work that Ben had promised did not materialize.

Instead, with no word of direction to Wayne, Ben went to the little room off the living room, the room that he called his office, and there immured himself. Mary busied herself with the customary tasks of the housekeeper, and Wayne, with no directions to carry out, rode the sorrel and the bay colt, but did not saddle the dun.

Dinner was a silent meal and after dinner Ben Prophet made an announcement.

"I'm goin' to town," he said; and walking around the table he bent down and kissed the astonished Mary Prophet on her cheek. Wayne, wide-eyed, watched his father. He had never seen Ben kiss Mary.

Back in his office Ben delved feverishly into the drawers of his dilapidated old desk. From the bottom drawer he resurrected a gun, a worn Colt, relic of the days when he had ridden for the Gunhammer. He tried and loaded the weapon, stuffed it into the waistband of his trousers and pulled down his vest to cover the butt.

Then, with his mouth dry, he went out to the corral and saddled Custer, a fourteen-year-old bay horse. Riding Custer out of the gate Ben did not look back. Mary Prophet, her son beside her, watched her husband go.

"What's got into Dad, Mother?" asked Wayne.

Mary shook her head. "I don't know," she answered; and then, looking at the boy, "What are you going to do this afternoon, Wayne?"

"Why—nothing," Wayne answered, suddenly perplexed. "Dad didn't say for me to do anything."

Mary Prophet's eyes were sharp as she looked at her son. "Why don't you ride the dun colt this afternoon, Wayne?"

"Why . . . " said Wayne, "I guess I will, Mother."

* * *

In Birdstone, with his mouth dry and his hands cold, Ben Prophet dismounted and tied Custer to a hitch-rail. He gave his levis a tug because the gun had sagged them; and then, trying to wet his lips with the tip of his dry tongue, he began his search.

Methodically he started up the street, heading toward Dave Morrison's pool hall. As he passed the stores and business establishments, men looked out and, seeing his wary progress, looked inquiringly at each other.

Vance Miller was in the pool hall playing rotation with Bud Pucket and Earl Snyder, boys from the upper Birdstone. Dave Morrison had Birch Loudermilk in the barber chair, cutting Birch's hair; and as Ben entered, Dave put down his scissors.

Straight back to the pool table Ben Prophet made his way. Vance Miller, straightening up after a shot, chalked his cue and met Ben's eyes. Slowly he put the chalk on the edge of the table.

"Miller," Ben said quietly, feeling that his tongue was thick and his throat dry

with the fright that was in him, "I rode in to tell you..." He hesitated momentarily, his hand resting on the smooth butt of the old gun at his waist and a little muscle quivering at the corner of his jaw, and then went on: "Leave town. You made enough trouble around here. Get out or I'll kill you."

Dave Morrison, still holding his scissors, hurried around the barber chair and came between Ben and the pool table. Vance Miller, astonishment showing on his face, looked at Ben.

"I don't want any trouble in here," Dave shrilled. "I won't have it. I won't have . . ."

Ben Prophet backed toward the door, through it, and out to the sidewalk. Clear out to the hitch-rail he backed before he turned, and in the pool hall the men made a little tableau that broke only when he walked slowly out of sight.

Then Dave lowered his scissors; Birch, jumping up from the barber chair, his haircut unfinished, reached for his hat; and Bud Pucket looked nervously at Earl Snyder and put his cue back in the rack.

"Why," said Vance, "what's got into Prophet? What—"

"I guess I'll go home," Bud Pucket said nervously. "I guess . . . You comin', Earl?"

Earl too replaced his cue. "Yeah," he answered, and wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Yeah, I'm comin', Bud." Vance Miller was left alone at the pool table, holding his cue and staring at the door.

"You go on, Vance," Dave Morrison ordered. "I don't want any trouble in here. You'd better go."

Vance put the cue on the table among the scattered pool balls and stared at the distraught Dave. Dave was sweating and his eyes were frightened and, somehow, with Bud and Earl gone, Vance felt curiously naked.

"You needn't bother about payin' for the game, Vance," Dave Morrison said. "You didn't finish it."

Vance pulled his hat down on his head and, without answering Dave, went out the door. He stopped in front of the pool hall. Down the street, on the bench in front of Jan Szabro's boot shop, Ben Prophet was sitting, a small, motionless figure in the shade of a big cottonwood. Vance Miller walked on across the street to Adolph Hahn's Home Ranch Saloon.

IT WAS Birch Loudermilk who carried the news of the meeting to Tom Sutcliffe. There was not much to Birch, but he was a good news carrier. He found Sutcliffe and Doc Botkin at their interminable game of checkers in Sutcliff's office. Birch blurted out his news.

"Ben Prophet just walked up to Vance Miller down in the pool hall," Birch said breathlessly, "an' told Vance to leave town or he'd kill him! He had a gun!"

Tom Sutcliffe methodically crowned a man in the king-row, but Doc Botkin jumped up, almost upsetting the checker board. "What happened?" Doc demanded.

"Dave run between them," Birch recounted with unction, "an' Prophet backed out of the door with his hand on his gun. I thought I'd better come tell you, Tom."

Deliberately Tom Sutcliffe got up from his chair. "Where's Ben?" he asked.

"Down the street in front of the boot shop."

"Where's Vance?"

"He was in the pool hall when I left."

"Remember, Tom?" Doc Botkin demanded. "Remember that time that Ben run into them horse thieves over in Saltpeter Canyon? Remember what happened then?"

Sutcliffe nodded his wise old head. "Ben won't go off half-cocked, Doc," Tom Sutcliffe said slowly. "Ben will give Vance time. You go down an' sit

with Ben and I'll hunt up Vance. Find out what the trouble is, if Ben will talk."

Doc Botkin took his hat and hurried out. Tom Sutcliffe, more slowly because he had more to move, followed the doctor. Birch, having begun to spread the news, followed Tom.

Dave Morrison told Sutcliffe where Vance Miller had gone; and with many a, "I don't want no trouble in here," and, "I don't know what started it," escorted the justice of the peace to the door. Plodding across the street toward the Home Ranch, Tom could see Ben Prophet sitting motionless on the bench and Doc Botkin standing before him, haranguing him.

* * *

In the cool dimness of the Home Ranch, Tom Sutcliffe found Vance Miller. Adolph Hahn was standing nervously behind the bar, his china-blue eyes protuberant and anxious.

"What's this between you an' Ben Prophet, Vance?" Sutcliffe demanded.

Vance Miller shook his head. The feeling of nakedness was still with him. He shook his head and his voice showed his grievance when he answered Sutcliffe's question.

"I don't know," Vance said. "I was playin' pool with Bud and Earl, and Prophet came walkin' in with his hand on his gun and told me to leave town or he'd kill me. I hadn't done nothin' to him."

"Hmm," grunted Tom Sutcliffe.

"It's a fine thing when a man can't live in peace around here!" Vance continued. "I was just playin' pool—"

"Mebbe," Sutcliffe interrupted softly, "you made a mistake when you came back here. You know you killed a man in Birdstone. I hadn't heard that the man you killed was any particular friend of Prophet's, but I don't know. I reckon you made a mistake when you came back, Vance."

"What are you goin' to do about it?" Vance demanded. "Are you goin' to let him—"

Once more Tom Sutcliffe interrupted. "What are *you* goin' to do, Vance?" he asked.

Vance Miller had killed a man and served time in the penitentiary. He had been lucky, he knew. There had been a fight, and in the melee Vance had grappled with a man and taken a knife thrust and fired a shot, and then had come five long years of walls and silent men and blue-coated guards standing by and watching every movement. Vance wet his lips nervously.

"You got to protect me," he said. "You can't—"

Tom Sutcliffe grunted. "I'll go talk with Ben, but I can't promise a thing.

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The stage to Norman is at four o'clock, Vance. You got nothin' to pack but your suitcase." Tom Sutcliffe turned and walked out of the door and Vance Miller watched him go. From outside, Doc Botkin's old voice came high and carrying.

"He won't say a word, Tom," Doc Botkin shrilled. "He just set there. He's got that old gun of his in his pants and . . ." Doc Botkin's voice died away.

"Give me a drink!" Vance Miller demanded.

"Sure," agreed Adolph heavily, moving behind the bar. "You take a drink on the house, Vance, and then you go, huh?"

The neck of the bottle rattled against the glass as Vance Miller poured his drink. He tossed it off and slammed the glass back on the bar. "You're all against me!" Vance Miller accused. "The whole damn town. I never did a thing. I served my time an' I came back here—"

"Sure," Adolph interrupted placidly. "That stage is at four o'clock, Vance."

Vance Miller looked into Adolph's china-blue eyes and saw no reassurance there. He looked at the clock on the wall where the brass pendulum swung inexorably back and forth. The hands marked ten minutes after three. "I . . ." Vance began and then, his voice weakening, "I —I'm goin' out the back door, Adolph."

"Sure," agreed Adolph Hahn.

CHAPTER THREE

Wayne's Coming of Age

AT SEVEN O'CLOCK with the July dusk sweet about him, Ben Prophet rode into his own yard. Mary had heard the horse come in and stood in the doordal, framed by the light that streamed around her.

"Is that you, Ben?" Mary called.

Custer had stopped under the check of the reins and Ben answered. "Yes."

"Did you finish your business in town?" Mary asked.

"Yes." Ben's voice was tired.

"Supper's ready," the woman in the doorway said. "I'll dish it up while you turn out your horse. And, Ben—"

"Yes?"

"Wayne rode the dun colt this afternoon."

Custer walked on toward the corral.

* * *

On Sunday morning Ben Prophet sat on his front porch. His mouth was dry and his hands were cold, for he was afraid. To him there came his son Wayne, a big, square-shouldered, blue-eyed boy.

Ben Prophet looked at the sky and it was clear. In the vines the kingbirds fluttered and on a bush in the yard a young kingbird sat alert, ready to capture the first insect that appeared.

"Wayne," Ben Prophet said.

"Yes, Dad."

"You ever think about goin' out an' getting yourself a job?"

"Why, no. You need me around here. Who would look after the riding if I left? There's work enough for two men."

Ben looked at his son, studied him carefully from head to toe. There was an air of assurance about Wayne that Ben had never seen before. Wayne was young and he was obedient—too obedient—and he had no idea that he was about to be shoved from his perch and out into an unfeeling world; but the boy was alert and he stood squarely, facing his father.

Riding that dun colt had done something for Wayne, something that years of obeying orders had never accomplished; and suddenly Ben Prophet didn't feel so frightened at what he was about to do.

"You better begin to think about it then," announced Ben Prophet directly, "because you're goin' to have to get yourself a job."

Wayne's eyes were blue and startled. "Why . . ." he began.

"You can have the buckskin colt," Prophet said harshly. "He's yours. You got a little money in the bank. It's time you made your livin', Wayne."

The blue eyes held an expression of hurt. Ben Prophet looked away from his son's face. He could not meet the blue eyes.

"I'm tired of feedin' you," Ben Prophet rasped. "Get out an' earn your keep. You can go tomorrow."

Silence for a moment and then, "No," snapped Wayne. "I'll go now. I won't stay where I ain't welcome!"

Ben heard his son stamp across the porch and into the house. He heard a door slam. Carefully Ben Prophet looked at the sky. It was still clear, no clouds, no spot circling high above the Screwplate yard.

From within the house came the sound of voices: a woman's quiet voice and the deeper, angry voice of a man. Ben Prophet sighed.

BIRDSTONE took the things that had happened as simple confirmation of its beliefs. Ben Prophet was fearless and he had no sentiment. Hadn't he run Vance Miller out of town, threatening to kill him? Vance Miller, who had served time in the penitentiary for manslaughter and who everybody said was a tough nut? Certainly he had.

And hadn't Ben Prophet chased his own son off the place and made him go out and get a job? His own son, mind you. Mary Prophet must be eating her heart out over that. It was a wonder she just didn't up and leave her husband, over his chasing the boy away!

Ben Prophet went his way, saying nothing. Wayne got a job riding with the Gunhammer, working for old Hi Metcalf. Mary cooked three meals a day and kept the house clean. What was in her mind no one knew. Ben had said, "He's got to learn, Mary," and that was all.

Summer rolled by into fall. The frosts came and the hills grew gaudy with bright colors. Calves were sold and shipped. The first snow fell. Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, one by one in orderly procession they filed past.

Sometimes, coming in from a long day, Ben Prophet found his wife's eyes bright. Once he saw a buckskin horse going down the road as he came in.

In March, with the wind whistling across the flats, Ben Prophet saddled a horse and rode over to the Gunhammer. Hi Metcalf was at home and took Ben into the house where a fire roared in the fireplace.

"Haven't seen you for quite a while, Ben," Metcalf said.

"No," Prophet agreed.

They sat down beside the fire. Prophet shifted nervously. Metcalf smoothed his white beard with a hand that showed blue-veined with age.

"You came over to hear about Wayne," Metcalf said quietly. "He's made a hand, Ben."

Ben Prophet nodded.

"I've had him in the Fuente camp," Hi Metcalf continued. "He hasn't lost a cow or a calf."

"Stayed in camp?" Prophet asked.

"Except that he's ridden over to the Archibalds sometimes," Metcalf answered.

Ben Prophet was silent for some time. Then, lifting his eyes, he looked at Metcalf. "I'm gettin' older," Ben said gruffly. "Got too much to look after. I'm goin' to let the Corwin lease go, Hi."

"That's a good piece of country," Metcalf said quietly.

"Got a house on it," Prophet said. "Good corrals an' water. Be a good place to start an outfit. The lease is cheap."

"Yes?" Metcalf made a question of the word.

"Take a young fellow," Ben Prophet

continued, turning so that his eyes did not meet Metcalf's, "that had some credit at the bank, he could take that lease an' stock the place, and in two or three years he'd come out."

"Yes?" Metcalf said again.

"I talked some to Carl Brill at the bank," Ben went on, his voice rasping a little. "Made some arrangements."

"And you want . . .?" said Metcalf.

"Wayne always liked the Corwin lease," Prophet said, and got to his feet. "I thought I'd tell you, Hi."

"Well," said Metcalf. "You got to go, Ben?"

"Got to be gettin' home," Prophet answered.

AT THE END of March the winds blew themselves out. In April there were rains. All through May and on into June the countryside was decorated with sprouting greenery and with little white-faced, red-bodied calves.

In May the Kingbirds nested in the vines on Ben Prophet's porch. By the middle of June the kingbirds were working from dawn to dark, feeding their brood. In June, on a Sunday morning, Ben Prophet sat on his front porch.

Sitting there, with the kingbirds working out in the yard and coming through the vines to bring food to their nests, Ben saw a buckskin horse come along the road. The buckskin came on, through the gate and across the yard to stop before the porch.

Wayne Prophet, back straight, eyes bold, face strong, dismounted from the buckskin and walked to the steps. He stood there, looking at his father. Ben Prophet did not move.

"I came to tell you," said Wayne, and there was defiance in his voice, "that I leased the Corwin place. Brill is going to advance me money to stock it."

"So?" said Prophet, not moving.

"And I'm goin' to marry Nancy Archibald," Wayne blurted. "Next week. I came to tell you."

In the rawhide-bottomed chair Ben Prophet stirred. His face was impassive and his eyes showed nothing. "Why don't you go tell your mother?" he asked.

"I've told her," Wayne answered. "I've been coming over to see her."

"I know you have," Ben said. And then, more slowly still "Why don't you ride over to Archibald's, Wayne? Get Nancy an' bring her back to dinner?"

"You—you want me to?" asked Wayne Prophet.

His words came slowly and he stared at his father.

"Why not?" answered Wayne's father.

At the foot of the steps the boy hesitated, his eyes troubled and a question in them.

"Go on, Wayne," Ben Prophet ordered. "You can cut across the pasture. There's some bog at the creek that you want to look out for, an' you be sure an' close the gate."

"All right," Wayne said, and turned toward the buckskin horse.

When the buckskin was gone through the gate and was out of sight behind the cottonwoods, Ben Prophet got up. He stood there on the porch of his home, and in the vines the kingbirds fluttered.

He watched the kingbirds. There were two nests in the vines now and two hungry broods to feed. In another week or so the fledglings would be full-feathered. In another fortnight or less, the fledglings would try their wings.

Ben wondered if it was hard on the old birds when the young ones flew. Probably it was. But then the kingbirds knew. Regardless of how hard it was, the kingbirds went ahead.

Ben Prophet walked across the porch. He must go in and tell Mary that there would be two more for dinner.

THE END

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Pete Worls cursed bitterly as he realized he had been tricked, and his hand went for his gun.

By Gunnison Steele

Brimstone Saddlemate

Dying, Trigger Tolliver still staved off the clutching fingers of the Grim Reaper . . . while he got himself a saddlemate for the long, brimstone ride. . . .

TRIGGER TOLLIVER was dying. He knew it, and knew that only his hate for the man who had shot him in the back had kept him alive even this long. But it would have taken more

than the hovering specter of death to keep from Tolliver's mean little eyes the quick flare of fierce triumph as he heard the thud of hoofs on the trail a hundred yards away.

Tolliver lay still a moment, his thick, pain-lanced body tense, trying to make his jerky breathing less harsh. Pete Worls, he decided, would not be coming back so soon. His stubby fingers tightened on the trigger of the gun in his hand. The gun roared into the sky.

The hoofbeats stopped abruptly. Silence beat at the wounded gunman's ears. Fear that the sudden gunshot had scared the horseman away stabbed at him. He tried to cry out, but savage pain hacked at his chest, and blood trickled with the hoarse croak from between his lips.

Trigger Tolliver lay several minutes, bitter-eyed, watching the brow of the little rise between him and the trail. He'd about decided the rider had fled, when he heard a slight noise on the other side of him. He turned his eyes.

A man stood there, gun in hand—a tall, lean, red-haired young hombre with hawkish features and bitter, smoke-flecked blue eyes. When he saw Tolliver was wounded, he quickly holstered his gun and stepped forward with cat-footed grace.

Sinewy brown fingers deftly pulled Tolliver's shirt aside, shrewd eyes probed at the ugly wound below his left shoulder. Then the red-haired youth's emotionless gaze shifted to Tolliver's flat face.

The gunman grinned sardonically. "You don't have to say it, hombre. I know—a slug's got me through the lung. I'm goin' to die. Ain't that right?"

The redhead nodded. "Looks that way. But maybe I'm wrong. Where yuh want me to take you?"

"Nowhere. I crave to stay right here."

"I'll bring a sawbones here, then. Where can I—"

"I don't want a sawbones," Trigger Tolliver cut in. His eyes probed at the stranger's youthful, bitter features. "Mister, you're stamped with the owlhoot brand, but yuh look plenty square to me. What handle yuh go by?"

"Some folks," said the tall man slowly, "call me Tonto Red."

"Tonto Red, huh? Not that it matters—now—but my monicker's Trigger Tolliver."

A spasm of pain made Tolliver close his eyes. That was why he didn't see the sudden stiffening of Tonto Red's lean body. He didn't see the quick flare of savage triumph in the tall youth's bitter eyes, or the tightening of thin lips.

BUT when Tonto Red spoke, his voice was low, calm. "Who shot yuh, Tolliver?"

"A slime-bellied snake!" Tolliver's black eyes opened, and naked hate was strong in them. "Pete Worls shot me—in the back, damn his ugly soul! Five years me and Pete have been partners, and I always played square with him. Now . . ."

"This Worls," asked Tonto Red softly. "Where is he now?"

"Hombre," the dying man parried, "I didn't shoot that gun and get you over here thinkin' yuh could help me live. I'm as good as dead, I savvy that."

Tonto Red's thin lips curled. "What d'you want, then?"

"I ain't got long to live, and talkin' hurts. But there's a few things I gotta say. A week ago Pete and me gutted a bank over in Clearwater Basin. Got $20,000 and made our getaway. Last night, we camped right here. This mornin' Pete says to me: 'Trigger, that looks like riders headin' this way over yonder.' And when I turn, he drills me in the back—like a rattler, without warnin'!"

Trigger Tolliver paused, and a tirade of abuse directed against the treacherous Worls came from his lips. "I was para-

lyzed by that bullet. I had to lay here and watch that skunk ride off with all that dinero, him thinkin' I was dead."

"You want me to trail Pete Worls and kill him for you, is that it?" Tonto Red asked.

"Hell, no!" Tolliver spat. "I crave to kill that back-shootin' snake myself, personal. Wolfhead lays over yonder a piece. I know Worls, know he'll go to Wolfhead and spend some o' that dinero on whiskey and women. Here's what I want yuh to do, Red: Ride into Wolfhead and find Pete Worls. Don't let on I'm not dead, but trick Pete into ridin' back out here, pronto."

"Then what?"

"Nothin'!" Tolliver gestured fiercely with the .45 still in his hand. "I'll do the rest. Will yuh do it?"

The lean youth crouched there a moment over the dying man, as if in deep thought. Tolliver saw the smoke wreaths deepen in his hard eyes, but he couldn't see the chaos, the bitter, wild thoughts that were tumbling through Tonto Red's mind. Finally, the redhead nodded slowly.

"I'll do it, Trigger. But maybe you won't be alive when he gets here."

"I'll live," Tolliver said fiercely. "Hell, I'll live a week if I have to!"

"Anything else you'd like to get off your mind?" Tonto Red asked with seeming carelessness.

There was a faraway look in Trigger Tolliver's pain-bright eyes, as if unpleasant memories were parading out of his black past to plague him. Then he grinned sardonically.

"Plenty! But they cain't be helped now. I lived bad, an' I'll die bad. But I ain't never been skunk enough to shoot a man in the back—only once."

"Only once," Tonto Red's murmur was like a cat purring. "Want to tell me about it?"

"Funny," Tolliver whispered. "I've thought a lot about that. It happened two years ago, down in the Buckhorn Hills country. Pete Worls was in on it with me. We'd hired our guns to Bart Storm, a range-hog who was tryin' to own all the Buckhorn country.

"There was a coupla youngsters down

Tonto Red

there who owned a little outfit that Storm had his eyes on. Bert Wilson and Johnny Winters, their names was, and they was hell-on-wheels for fightin' men. Happened, though, they fell in love with the same girl, and one day they got drunk in town and had words over her. That same night, out at their little ranch, Bert Wilson was killed, shot in the back. Like Pete shot me. . . ."

Tonto Red, staring along the horizon seemed not to be listening to Tolliver's words. But his eyes were savagely bleak. The lines were gouging deeper into his young face.

"Then what happened?" he asked.

"Why, Johnny Winters was accused of the killin', like Bart Storm meant for him to be. Me and Pete Worls really done that killin'. Pete talked to 'im in front, and I shot him, from behind. Johnny Winters claimed, when they arrested him, that he'd been out roundin' up some stray calves when the shootin' happened, but didn't nobody believe him. Johnny Winters

didn't hang, though. He broke jail one night and took to the outlaw trail.

"Some way, he found out who done that killin', and he's been trailin' me and Pete ever since. Several times he's come damn close to gettin' us, too. Wouldn't surprise me if this Johnny Winters was close on our back trail, right now. But he's waited too late. I'm done for. And Pete Worls'll soon be in hell, if you'll do like I said."

"I'll do it," Tonto Red declared, "on one condition. Seems like this Johnny Winters got a mighty dirty deal. Looks like you owe him somethin', him and this girl that might be waitin' for him down in the Buckhorn country."

"What of it?" Trigger Tolliver snapped impatiently. "I'm dyin', hombre, and I'd rather see Pete Worls die than live myself. What do you want me to do?"

"I want yuh to put in writin' what you just told me. About how you two murdered Bert Wilson, and how Bart Storm hired yuh to do it. And about some other things Bart Storm hired yuh to do—enough to put a rope around his yellow neck."

Tolliver grinned painfully. "That's a fair trade. I'm dyin'; it cain't hurt me—and Storm's a skunk."

Tonto Red produced a piece of paper and a stubby pencil. The scratch of the stubby pencil as the tall youth wrote swiftly, the harsh, uneven breathing of Trigger Tolliver, were the only sounds in the little hollow offsetting the trail.

Tonto Red placed the paper on Tolliver's chest, and Tolliver, without trying to read what had been written, scrawled his name at the bottom. Leaving paper and pencil on the wounded man's chest, Tonto Red got to his feet.

"That'll clear Johnny Winters, when it's found," he declared. "And it'll hang the man who made him an outlaw."

Trigger Tolliver's grin was ghastily. "Never thought I'd go out doin' a good deed. But I never thought I could hate a man like I hate Pete Worls. Red, did yuh ever have a partner?"

"Yeah," said Tonto Red, softly. "Yeah, I had a partner once."

He turned abruptly, vanished through a screen of cedars, and Trigger Tolliver could hear the thud of his boots as he went toward his horse. . . .

SHADOWS from the setting sun were slinking across the plain when Tonto Red rode into the cowtown of Wolfhead. Leaving his steel-dust gelding at a hitch-rack, Tonto went on to Wolfhead's single, narrow, dusty street.

His probing eyes told him the town boasted half a dozen saloons. But one, The Great Western, presented a more gaudy and imposing appearance than the others. Accordingly, Tonto Red stalked between its swinging doors.

Inside, his cat-footed grace, his bleak-eyed wariness fell like a cloak from him. As he stared, a trifle bewildered, about the room which was already lighted by a couple of swinging kerosene lamps, he seemed simply a gawky, not overly bright cowpoke who didn't come to town too often.

But Tonto Red's smoke-flecked eyes missed nothing. Probably a dozen hard-faced, gunbelted men were in the barroom. Two or three stood at the long wooden bar. Half a dozen others were sweating a three-handed stud game that was going at a table at the back of the big room. Tonto Red's eyes flicked carelessly over the faces of the three poker players.

One of the players was a thin, rat-eyed hombre. Another was a burly, red-bearded rancher. The third player was gaunt, and scarfaced, with slanting, yellowish eyes. Pete Worls, Tonto Red knew. . . .

But Tonto Red's wide-eyed, nervous expression didn't change as he shuffled awkwardly to the bar and ordered whiskey. The heavy-jowled barkeep glanced sharp-

ly at the red-haired youth as he shoved out bottle and glass. Tonto downed the whiskey at a single gulp and sighed with satisfaction.

"That helps," he declared, a trifle louder than was necessary, "after what I just saw."

"What'd yuh see, sonny?" grunted the barkeep.

"I saw," said Tonto Red, "a dead man!"

Sudden silence gripped the barroom. All eyes turned on Tonto Red. Then bootheels thudded as the poker players and the men surrounding the table strode to the bar and hemmed Tonto Red. All but Pete Worls.

"Feller," said the burly rancher, "just where'd yuh see this dead man?"

"Four-five miles out," Tonto answered promptly, "lyin' in a little hollow a hundred yards off the trail. He'd been shot in the back. A big, black-whiskered gent. But seems like the snake who murdered him made a mistake. The big hombre lived long enough to write a note, maybe tellin' who killed 'im. It was layin' on the ground beside him."

"I guess you read that note," cut in the barkeep. "Who'd the feller say done the killin'?"

Tonto shuffled his boots embarrassedly. "I cain't read writin'. So I left that note layin' there. And I didn't touch the murdered man. I hit for town, aimin' to tell the sheriff."

"You done right," approved the big rancher. He said to one of the punchers, "Slim, yuh go get Sheriff Grayson. We'll ride out there and find out a few things!"

The lanky puncher scurried onto the darkening street. A babble of excited voices rose.

Tonto Red, watching Pete Worls, saw the gaunt killer get to his feet. Fear played in changing patterns over Worls' face, but his slanting eyes were savage as he strolled carelessly to the door, eased through the batwings unto the street.

"I got to see about my hoss," said Tonto Red.

His eyes, no longer lazy and dull, knifed along the street. His gaze riveted on a shadowy horseman that was quirting a plunging mount from the lower end of the street. Tonto Red ran into the alley, mounted the steel-dust gelding and rode swiftly on the trail of Pete Worls.

Pete Worls rode west, and he rode fast. Tonto Red guessed he was aiming to beat the posse to the spot where he had murdered his partner and destroy that damning note. Tonto clung just close enough on Worls' trail to glimpse the killer as he was etched against the sky several times in topping rises.

Then, abruptly, they were nearing the little hollow beside the trail where, little more than an hour before, Tonto Red had left Trigger Tolliver—a man kept

(Continued on page 96)

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Little Dan tried to fight free as Black Lightning reared and toppled, but his aching body wouldn't react fast enough.

The Shirt Off His Bloody Back!

By Bart Cassidy

BIG BOB DRUMMOND was a towering, swaggering youngster, a hail-fellow-well-met, popular with everyone and a devil with the ladies. Little Dan Drummond, his brother, was quiet, retiring, steady as a clock and a hard nut

Not even his stumbling gait or his stove-up posture could dull the gleam of Little Dan Drummond's badge of honor, which Little Dan bought with flaming gun—and his brother's blood!

to crack in a trade. In his friendships, Big Bob demanded much. Little Dan had learned to give. Folks said that Bob would prosper and that Dan . . . Well, how could a man prosper who gave away all he made in the name of friendship?

The brothers owned adjoining spreads down on the Salado. They had fine grass, good white-faced stock and every chance in the world to make good, until the summer of the big water.

It had been raining hard in the Mogollons for weeks, and the Salado was running bank full of roiled and muddy water, and had for a week. Walking down Payson's dusty main drag that muggy afternoon, Little Dan cast a weather eye on the huge bank of thunderheads spreading from the rim out toward the towering Four Peaks in the west. Jovial Marshal Bill Pate, smoking contentedly on the porch of his tiny office, called out to the smaller of the brothers.

"She's comin' down in the middle, Dan! An' if she does, you better get the stock outa yore corrals an' haze 'em back to the uplands."

Dan, bracing himself against the rising gale, nodded that he had heard, found his pony and loped swiftly toward the ranch. The rain caught him a few miles out of Payson, and before Dan reached his outfit, every barranca was running bank full, slowing his pace painfully.

First glimpse of his layout, down yonder in the *alamosa* told Dan that it was nip and tuck if he could save anything. But in the realization, he forgot to think of himself. His fears were all for Big Bob, three miles up the stream. And there he rode, giving no heed to the fact that his own lower corrals held a new purchase of forty young breeders and that his house held the new furniture he had purchased against his pending marriage to Betty Lou Bonner, over at Gisela.

He reached his brother's in time to help Big Bob save his personal effects and his corralled ponies before the house went down the stream, along with the barn and outbuildings, fences and hundreds of tongs of wild hay. Through it all, he worked like a beaver, hoorawing his bigger, handsomer brother who raved and blasphemed at this stroke of an unkind fate. From Bob came no word of sympathy for the brother who had lost all to help him, no offer to ride to Dan's place to see what could be done. So Dan rode alone, uncomplaining and philosophic, to a scene of utter ruin.

Next day Big Bob showed up to view the ruin of a fine outfit. He looked at the pathetic wreckage of Dan's spread without an expression of regret or without a word of thanks for what Dan had done for him. His mind was full of plans for getting back on his own feet.

"We're in the same boat, Dan," Bob grinned. "Anything I saved yesterday is gone today. Last six months I've dropped plenty at Tom Harris' poker tables. He's on me now, an' I'm lettin' him take the outfit to square it."

Dan's heart sank. Somehow he'd looked to Big Bob to help him start again. But now—well, what the hell? He had Betty Lou to comfort and encourage him. And Big Bob was alone.

"Don't worry, Bob," he said, smiling wanly. "We're not licked yet. We'll raise [illegible] somewhere, stock my place an' s[illegible] can't keep a Drummond down."

"Money!" Big Bob sniffed. "If you can raise any, you're a better man than I am—which I ain't ready to admit! Where'll you raise it?"

"We'll go to Prescott!" announced Little Dan. "Me an' you, Bob. Between us we orta be able to knock over some o' them rich prizes in the Frontier Days Rodeo."

"We ain't show riders," protested Big Bob. "Them ringers will make us look foolish."

"We can't let 'em do that," insisted Dan fiercely. "We mustn't. They're ridin' fer whiskey money; we're ridin' fer a start. There'll be day money, team ropin', calf an' steer tyin' an' bronc twistin'. Somewhere in that layout, we'll get our start."

He carried that same fierceness, coupled with a determination that knew no defeat, into those desperate cowboy championships, in Prescott. Thanks to Dan's quick looping, the Drummond brothers won the finals of team roping. Dan was second in the calf tie and was in the day money in the first bucking trials. The night after the first day's contests, Big Bob whooped it up with the boys, got drunk and didn't go to bed at all. He missed his first cast in the steer tie next day and was eliminated. And that afternoon he was piled by the first bucker he forked.

LITTLE DAN took an awful body beating in the bronc riding. But his rides were masterpieces of indomitable fighting iron. On the last afternoon, he and a big rider from Wyoming were finalists. Dan drew Black Lightning, the wickedest bucker of them all. When the megaphone rolled his name into the stands, Little Dan settled his thin legs behind the bucking rolls, filled his lungs and relaxed.

"Let me have him!" he commanded.

The chute opened and Black Lightning bolted—a black streak of concentrated sin and corruption. The first ten seconds were a pain-filled, brain-numbing eternity. Spur an' fan! Ride 'im, cowboy! That sunfishing, hell-fighting black devil was out to kill a man!

Blood welling into his mouth, a red film over his eyes, the crowd became a blur, their roars like the rumbling of distant thunder, and all the while hell fires were crackling through his chest. Then—the whistle! By God, he'd ridden Black Lightning! He'd won! And there came the pick-up men. It would be over now.

But they didn't come fast enough. Black Lightning reared, toppled backward. Dan tried to step free, but his aching body was slow to react. He was blinded with blood and sweat. He didn't care. Black Lightning was squealing, falling—backwards. Down . . . ! Then came choking dust, pain and—oblivion!

Dan was in a cast, stiff and rigid, when he came to. He was lying in the hospital with ice packs about his head. Big Bob was there, grinning happily.

"Yuh won it, kid," he chortled. "Better'n a thousand dollars in prizes between us. Enough tuh start us handsome. Now you jest lay here an' get well. I'll go on back an' take care o' things till you feel fit. Don't you worry about anything."

So Bob went back to Payson, and Dan lay there for long, weary months, mending a broken back and a pair of legs. He was waiting to hear from Bob. He thought his brother would show up any day, mebbyso fetching Betty Lou down from Gisela to see him. Once, the nurse brought him pencil and paper and he wrote his girl a letter. No answer came back. That hurt, and Dan didn't do it again. The casts came off and he was in a wheel chair for a month, then he was doing graduated exercises. His back had a kink in it and one leg was shorter than the other. He'd never ride again, the medico told him, but still he could grin. Bob could do the riding for them both; and Betty Lou would surely understand.

Dan was strangely excited as he approached Payson on the stage. Folks he had known for years were there to see the stage roll in. They nodded to him with a stiffness and embarrassment that stirred Little Dan strangely. He could read pity in their eyes, and he resented pity. Hell, he was all right! But where was Bob?

Inquiry elicited the information that Bob was running the new Payson Mer-

cantile Store. Dan went down there, wondering. Bob was all smiles, greeted him effusively, told him how he'd proposered and how, six months before, he had married Betty Lou.

"Yuh see, Dan," he explained glibly, "it ain't that she didn't care fer you. But seein' as how you would have to cripple around fer the rest o' yore life, it wasn't fair. I was well fixed to take care of her, so . . ." Bob shrugged.

"I savvy," murmured Dan, and his smile was an unbeautiful thing. "What part do I take in the picture now, Bob? Clerkin' in the store, mebby?"

Big Bob scowled. "I reckon not, Dan. I'm runnin' a high-toned place here. It wouldn't look so good to have a cripple messin' around the store. Besides, there's heavy stuff to move around, too heavy for a little stove-up squirt like you. Better look around fer somethin' else."

Dan did. He looked up a saloon and bought a bottle. After that, another. Betty Lou's faithlessness hit him harder than anything else and it tortured him, waking and sleeping, drunk or sober. Swiftly he hit the greased skids to hell, with Big Bob openly disclaiming responsibility for his actions. The townsmen pointed to him as the horrible example.

Only Marshal Bill Pate stood firm in his friendship for Little Dan, letting him sleep in the jailhouse when he was drunk. When he was broke and jittery, Bill Pate staked him to a bottle, and then nursed him through an attack that was very close to the D.T.'s. Feeding him, preaching to him. Bill Pate defended Little Dan to his traducers. It was fated that Little Dan could never repay those favors, but . . .

One day Little Dan sat in the sun in front of the Payson Saloon. He was, as usual, drunk. But he was not too drunk to spot that play down at the Mercantile. Two tough-looking strangers had dismounted at the rack, glancing nervously up and down street before entering. Marshal Pate must have noticed, too, for he came running across the street, drawing as he ran. As he hit the boardwalk, a lance of flame ripped from within the store. Bill Pate staggered back, swayed and fell dead.

Something snapped in Dan's drink-fogged brain. Someone had slain his friend—the only friend he'd known since he'd come back to town, a broken man. Like a grotesque crab, he sidled swiftly to the store, snatched the gun from Bill Pate's nerveless hand and darted across the threshold.

Big Bob was screaming at him, "Don't, Dan—don't! Stay out! They'll kill me!"

"Damn right!" snarled the outlaw who held a gun in his back. "Another step, feller, an' I'll blow him in two!"

Little Dan's gun flung up. If he ripped ahead, the outlaws must perforce forget Bob to take care of him. He was right. As he sidled forward, the outlaw shoved Bob aside, whirling to face the greater threat. Two pistols roared and both Dan and the outlaw fell, just as the robber at the till was lifting his weapon to finish his partner's job. Big Bob could have kicked the man off his feet, so close was he. But instead, he elected to run. And in running, he intercepted the slug meant for Dan. Big Bob fell, groaning. From the floor, Little Dan dropped the man at the till. It was over, and four men lay upon the bloodstained boards.

LITTLE DAN DRUMMOND wears Bill Pate's star now. Payson folks have forgotten his lapse in the light of what they know him to be. They love and respect him, not for the way he maintains the peace of Payson—and no one could do it better—but for his unselfishness in looking to the needs of Big Bob, who is bedridden for life, and of Betty Lou who is reaping the harvest of her faithlessness.

A dark form, crouching low, crept up to the sluice boxes. It was Ed Renfrew.

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Two Men— One Town!

By William Donald Bray

There were only two men in that ramshackle, deserted ghost town. But that was one man too many. . . .

OF ALL types of human jackals, the gold fields hanger-on ranks among the worst. The individual prospector digs like a badger in hard rock or sluices placer gravels for tiresome years —and one day, if he's lucky, makes his strike.

Then the skulker, with his ear carefully attuned to the gossip of the gold buyers, the stores and the saloons, gets an inkling

of the miner's well-deserved good fortune.

It is his day.

He watches, creeps and strikes. He is doubly dangerous. For he is equipped for his dishonorable profession with a sly, stealthy trickery; and the thought of the gleaming yellow metal fortifies his puny courage to desperation.

Such was Pennyweight Searles.

High on the crest of the ridge, concealed by an upthrust of rock, he lay watching the valley below. His pinched features twisted into the unmistakable lines of greed; his broken-nailed fingers gripped the rock ledge under him. There were only eight of these fingers, to be exact. He had left two in the Klondike when a miner, awakening in the moonlight, had seen Pennyweight's exploring hand on the windowsill.

The scene below would have held an artist in rapt attention. But Pennyweight Searles was not interested in scenic color. He was oblivious to the beauty of the Sierra Nevada foothills, with its summer-browned grassy slopes, and its green alders and willows along the creek that wound along the valley, and the picturesque old ghost town of stone and adobe.

No, the watcher had his mind on more practical things. Such as the two cabins on opposite sides of the single street at the lower end of town. These two buildings alone showed signs of occupancy. Pennyweight's green eyes squinted as he reviewed the information that had brought him here.

Two old-timers, Ed Renfrew and Jim Lane, owned the land on the opposite sides of the street. They quarreled continually; they were out in the middle of the street now, evidently engaged in a wordy battle. Lately Pennyweight had heard Jim Lane had been marketing big nuggets of reddish gold. Not since the bonanza days had this type of gold been found.

Sunlight glistened on the water in Lane's string of sluice boxes. They ran beside a gravel terrace he was working, about fifty yards back from the present course of the creek. Pennyweight's gaze shifted back to the two quarrelers. Each stayed religiously on his own side. Neither, according to rumor, would have been found dead on the other's land.

The watcher grinned as he thought of this. The idea seemed to please him. Then his eyes focused sharply on another development.

Four ancient burros were coming down the dirt road. Two of them were piled high with prospecting and camping equipment. Atop the other pair sat two young fellows singing lustily. The burros clip-clopped around a curve and into the old ghost town.

Ahead, on the main street, the two fighting gladiators, Jim Lane and Ed Renfrew, paid no attention to the new arrivals. They were too busy with their quarrel.

THE BURROS were sociable creatures, interested in what was going on in the world. Politely they paused to listen in to the heated words that were being flung back and forth between the old-timers.

Highgear Baker, aboard the lead critter, jammed his heel into the animal's side. "Let's go, boy!" he commanded. The burro only twitched an ear forward to catch Jim Lane's latest imprecation.

Pliocene Platt, aboard his burro, was also giving orders. "Let's go, Molly," he told his ancient mare. As an afterthought, he added, "Please." He might as well have been talking to a stone wall. Where is the female, burro or woman, who can resist listening in to some one else's quarrel? Molly stayed put.

Highgear Baker and Pliocene Platt lost patience about the same time, and reacted about the same way. Both of them unlimbered their off heels and banged them into their respective burro's ribs. The burros also reacted about the same way. They went first straight up, then

sideways, then down, then up. Then they come down very hard indeed.

At this point, the similarity of action varied somewhat. Pliocene was flung against a fig tree that stood beside the road. He picked himself up and unconcernedly sat down on a bedding roll that had come loose. Plump ripe figs, shaken loose by the jar, were falling around him. Pliocene tasted one appreciatively. "Looks like we've had an accident," he offered.

Highgear pulled himself up off the grass where he had landed and took a look around, at the empty adobe buildings, at the rotting wood false fronts, at the ancient sign across the way that said in faded lettering: "Big Nugget Hotel." "It looks like," Highgear growled, "we've come as far as we're going. Anyhow, as far as these burros are going."

"Sure," grinned Pliocene. "That's why I'm making myself at home."

They made a good pair. Pliocene—blond, calm, deliberative—acted as a check on his impetuous black-haired partner.

They had done well in Mariposa County until their quartz vein pinched out. Before they finally gave up hope of picking it up again, they had gotten down to a total cash capital of seven dollars and forty cents. So they had started north, looking for a place to make beans quickly. It looked like this would have to be the place.

Now both turned their heads to look at the old-timers. Apparently they were so wrapped up in their debate that they hadn't even noticed the newcomers. The thin one's nose and chin were quivering like a rabbit's, nibbling at a choice bit of lettuce.

"My land's better'n yours!" he squealed. "My prospect holes are better'n yours! And my side of town is better'n yours, you—you—"

He sputtered like an old steam engine and stopped completely.

"Tub of lard?" offered the other helpfully. "That was what you wanted to call me, wasn't it, Jim?"

"How do you know what I was going to call you?"

"You always do at this stage of the game," Ed Renfrew said. He waved his hand and turned away. "I've got business to attend to. Visitors."

Hearing him in the argument, the partners had thought that Ed Renfrew was a crabby type. Instead he was very friendly. His brown eyes twinkled with good humor and he talked to them. He soon had their story, and had been studying them closely as they told it.

"I'll do it," he exclaimed suddenly.

"Do what?"

"Listen," he went on to the surprised partners. "Jim Lane's always yelling about his side of town being better than mine. I'm going to fox him—fix up my side. It will pay, because with the new price of gold, there's lots of people coming into this country. There's four buildings on my side: this hotel, two store buildings and a livery stable.

"I've been thinking about this for some time, but I was too busy mining and, lately, digging me a new well. I know a man who'll jump at the chance to run the hotel, soon as it's repaired. I'll grubstake you and furnish the material; you do the work and we'll figure out some kind of a partnership agreement. What do you say?"

And so, with very little further discussion, the strange bargain was made.

"We've got half a town now," Highgear said, "so we've got to act important!" He threw out his chest. "We'll build this place up until it's the pride of the West. We'll make a thriving trade center, a metropolis out of this town of —of—"

He stopped and looked at Ed Renfrew. "What's the name of this town, anyway?"

"Fools' Gold," said Mr. Renfrew.

"Ouch!" said Highgear.

THEY moved into the hotel bridal suite and moved the pack rats out. Then they started the big cleanup job, beginning with the hotel.

The thick adobe walls of the buildings were in perfect condition. They all had steel doors and window shutters, rusted red since the days of the Argonauts. Most of the windows had a grating of thick bars. Much of the flooring and interior woodwork was warped and darkened with age, and blue sky showed through the shake roofs. However, this was the dry season; they could let the roofs go until later.

Highgear was walking through the old hotel barroom. He suddenly gave a startled yell, threw out his arms as the rotten flooring gave under his weight, and went through to his knees.

"I see now what you're good for," announced Pliocene. Before Highgear could retort he added, "Get a shovel and pan."

When Highgear came back his partner had the flooring ripped up around the bar. "The barkeeps used to be hired by the size of their thumb and forefinger," Pliocene explained, "so they could take a big pinch of dust. They must have spilled some. Let's pan the ground underneath."

The first pan showed a long string of fines and a dozen small nuggets. Some of the following ones were even better. By dark, they had skimmed off the top pay dirt and lacked only two pennyweight's of having three ounces.

They kept the gold dust in an old pill bottle, which they cached under the mattress. Some of the nuggets were so pretty they spread them out on the table that night to look at. Both were so tired they soon stumbled into bed, forgetting to put the nuggets away.

In the morning the nuggets were gone.

That called for a council of war. Finally, after a long argument, they decided to say nothing about the nuggets. They still had the dust; and they had been careless in leaving the nuggets out in plain sight.

"If we say anything," Pliocene pointed out, "it's just the same as directly accusing one of the old-timers. There's only the four of us in town. And I can't believe either one of them would do a trick like this."

"All right," agreed Highgear, "we'll say a pack rat did it. But from now on we'll keep our eyes open."

They tore into the job of repairing the hotel, but the ugly shadows of doubt and suspicion dulled their enjoyment. Neither could make sense out of the situation. All the evidence was that one of the old-timers was a thief.

Yet Ed Renfrew was happy and smiling; there was not the slightest hint of evasion in his manner. Later he went to the place back of his cabin where he was digging the new well. The partners began to wonder why he had built a new wellhouse around the well, with a chain lock on the door, when he said the well wasn't even completed.

Jim Lane, when he saw the other side of town being fixed up, could only sputter and choke when he met Ed Renfrew. That afternoon the partners went across the creek to where he was sluicing. He, like the other old-timer, was kindly and considerate as long as he was safely away from the other.

He reached into the first riffles and pulled out a glistening reddish-yellow nugget. "Glad I'm finding this kind lately," he confided. "It used to be all clear yellow stuff, but terrible poor pickings. Now I'm doing fine." He paused. "If you fellows run short of grub or need some money, let me know. I'd hate to see you in need, even if you are working for that bloated, knock-kneed, pie-eyed . . ."

And that seemed to be that. Until the night when Highgear, sitting on the upstairs porch of the hotel, looked across the creek and though he saw someone slipping around Jim Lane's sluices.

In the morning, Jim Lane asked them sharply, "Have you been over on my claim sampling? Somebody took test pans out of my gravel bank. I saw the places."

They told him no, and had little time to think about that the rest of the day. The man who wanted the hotel came over, was greatly pleased at the way things were looking, and said he would move in at the end of the week. He already had several miners and survey gang lined up for first customers. It began to look as if that part of their venture was off to a flying start.

But the other matter troubled them. That night they decided to investigate. A thin slice of new moon drooped early behind the western ridge, and there was only starlight. They slipped across the creek. Moving silently, they reached the upper end of Jim Lane's sluices, and crouched behind a pile of rocks, revolvers in hand.

There was a long wait, while their muscles cramped. Then they tingled to the sound of stealthy approaching footsteps. A dark form, crouching low, crept up to the sluice boxes. He reached down into the boxes—and they saw his face and outline clearly.

It was Ed Renfrew.

HIGHGEAR, in sheer astonishment, stood up to see better. A rock rolled under his feet.

At the sound, Renfrew leaped away like a startled jackrabbit. Before the partners could recover from their shock he had disappeared under the willows along the creek.

"So that's where he gets the money to fix up his buildings," snorted Highgear. "We're working with a sluice-box robber."

"This whole thing doesn't add up right," Pliocene protested.

"You bet it doesn't!" Highgear growled. "Not for us to be mixed up in. Let's pull out of this place—if we have to walk!"

They walked over to the sluices. "If I know anything about human nature . . ." Pliocene began.

Highgear suddenly stooped and picked up a nugget off the ground. An extra large, reddish one—over an ounce. "Dropped this when we scared him," Highgear said scornfully. "That's the kind of a man we're working with. Let's pack up!"

Pliocene demurred. He stoutly refused to believe the evidence of his own eyes. They told him that Ed Renfrew was a sneak thief—but still, he couldn't make himself believe it.

But both were disgusted, chilled by that feeling of cynicism that follows the discovery of a misplaced trust. They argued what to do: whether to confront Ed Renfrew and accuse him or to go to Jim Lane.

Engrossed in this discussion they had unconsciously walked along the creek close back of Jim Lane's cabin. Suddenly a voice spoke up sharply: "What's that you're saying about Ed?

Jim Lane stepped out from the shadows under the alders. He thrust out his chin aggressively. "I couldn't help hearing you. Mean to tell me you're accusing him of robbing my sluices?"

"Since you've overheard us," Pliocene stated flatly, "yes! We saw him doing it. Here's a nugget he dropped when he ran away!"

The very simplicity of the statement convinced Jim Lane. He fell back a step, took a long breath. The partners, remembering the wordy battles, expected to hear a blast of denunciation that would sear and wither Ed Renfrew even at this distance.

Instead he said simply, "Poor Ed!"

"What—what do you mean?" stuttered Highgear. From the way the old-timers fought, he had thought that either would dance with glee at the other's funeral. "I thought you said he was a spavined, lop-eared, stem-winding—"

Jim Lane stepped forward. He shook a skinny fist in Highgear's face.

"Ed Renfrew's one of the squarest fellows that ever lived! Say one more word against him and I'l knock your block off!"

Highgear stared, choked, and managed to hide a smile.

It was Pilocene's turn to say amazedly, "But he was stealing."

"It's a shame," answered Jim Lane, and there was a suspicious hoarseness in his voice, "that a man can't do a little quiet highgrading around here without you fellows butting in!"

"Say!" protested Pliocene. "This is too much! He—you—we—"

"You've got a lot to learn about human nature," said Jim Lane, and Highgear almost snickered in spite of his stunned astonishment. "Don't you see? If Ed is highgrading off me it means that he's awful hard up. He's spending a lot fixing up those houses; he probably started it in the first place because he didn't have enough to eat. He's welcome to all he wants. And you fellows stay out of this, or I'll skin you alive."

"You—you mean that?" gasped Highgear. "This doesn't make sense! You mean you don't care if he highgrades off you?"

"Certainly not!" stated Jim Lane. "Ed is honest. He'll pay it back—every pennyweight of it—when he can. I'm glad to let him have it. I'm making plenty now; I can afford it. I'd lend it to him gladly, but he's too stubborn to ask me for help even if he was starving to death. Now you fellows run along, act like nothing had happened and keep still. I wouldn't have a story like this told about Ed for anything!"

Back in their room, the partners walked the floor, held their aching heads in their hands, and tried to realize that they were actually awake and not dreaming the whole thing. Now they didn't know what to do. If Jim Lane, the man who was being robbed, didn't object, why should they say anything? Was it any of their business, under these circumstances?

Still, they were agreed on one thing. They didn't like the idea of using stolen money to build up their side of the town, even if it was only being "borrowed" from Jim Lane's sluices.

They hated to pull up stakes and leave. Already, with windows fixed, piles of rubbish swept up and burned, and the general air of neglect changed, the hotel was beginning to look like something. It was an excellent business chance for them and they didn't want to throw it away.

"I don't believe it yet," Pliocene said suddenly. "There's something more to it than we know. Ed Renfrew wouldn't have stolen our nuggets. And who was sampling Jim Lane's gravels? And why is Lane suddenly gitting reddish gold, when he didn't get any before?"

THEY couldn't figure an answer to those questions. After a while Highgear went out, saying he was going to take a walk and get his thoughts cleared up. Pliocene sat for a while, staring at one spot on the window pane. The more he thought, the more convinced he became that there was an unknown element in the situation, that it might involve danger, and that if they pulled out now, it might mean leaving the old-timers to face some threat alone.

He got up and walked down the road. Maybe if he went back over the ground again he could pick up a clue. Pliocene crossed the creek and as he came towards the sluices he heard a groan.

Highgear was limp, but his respiration and pulse were strong. Pliocene turned him over, found a bruise on the right side of his head. He wet his handkerchief in the sluices and slapped the cold water on Highgear's face.

As Pliocene started to carry him, Highgear came out of it fighting, seized Plio-

cene by the throat and the two of them almost went down on the rocks. Then Highgear recognized his partner and his hands loosened.

"Who hit you? What happened?" Pliocene demanded.

Highgear pressed his hand tenderly to the side of his head.

"I don't know," he said. "I came over here to look around. I was right there by the sluices when I heard a noise behind me. I started to whirl around; then a hand caught me over the mouth and something hit me and I saw lots of stars. There"— he paused suddenly—"there was something funny about that hand I felt. Only three fingers!"

Highgear was still shaky on his feet. With Pliocene supporting him they crossed the creek, went past Jim Lane's house. The door was open and a lamp burned dimly, but Lane was not there. Pliocene took Highgear to the hotel, left him there. Then Pliocene went to Ed Renfrew's cabin.

It, too, was unoccupied.

But light showed through the cracks of the new pine boards of the wellhouse. Pliocene hurried over to it and was just ready to knock when, through a crack, he saw Ed Renfrew reach the top of a ladder sticking out of the well.

Something in Ed Renfrew's manner rooted Pliocene in his tracks. He turned the windless handle and brought up a bucketful of gravel. He picked up a gold pan, took some of the gravel and began to wash it out in a small panning tub. He panned quickly, expertly, and as he neared the bottom Pliocene saw several big reddish nuggets in the pan!

The sight of the raw gold broke the spell that was holding Pliocene inactive. He didn't understand this yet; but he had a purpose in coming over here. He burst in the door.

"Did you hit Highgear?" snapped Pliocene. "We know that you were over there at least once tonight. We saw you."

If Renfrew was acting, it was good. His mouth dropped open, his eyes got as big as saucers.

"What about Highgear? Where? When?"

Pliocene told him quickly. "And Jim Lane isn't in his cabin, and Highgear said something about the man's hand having only three fingers!"

"What?" yelled Ed Renfrew. "Three fingers! That's Pennyweight Searles!" He leaped for the door, almost knocking Pliocene down. and raced towards his cabin. In an instant he rushed back out with a double-barreled shotgun.

"You stay out of this!" he ordered Pliocene. "I'll take care of that skunk!"

"No you won't!" declared Pliocene. "I'm going right along."

Ed Renfrew saw that the young man was determined and he wasted no time in argument. With Pliocene at his heels he hurried over to Jim Lane's cabin.

"Pennyweight has got him!" Renfrew raved wildly. "He's trying to make poor Jim tell where he gets the red gold and Jim can't tell him because Jim doesn't know himself. He's probably torturing Jim right now! We've got to find them!"

Hurriedly they searched around the sluices, then further up the creek. On a bench just above the creek, the walls of an old Chinese rock house showed whitely in the starlight. The roof had been burned long ago in a brush fire; now only the four walls remained, with two black rectangles marking a door and window.

Muffled sounds came to their ears. Pliocene crept to the window, Ed Renfrew to the doorway. Inside, the old dirt floor was now covered with grass. On this lay Jim Lane, bound and gagged.

A dark form leaned over him hissing, "So you won't tell me, huh? I've panned that gravel bank, and there's no red gold in it. Where're you gettin' it?"

Jim Lane shook his head. "All right,"

sneered Pennyweight. He jerked a pair of pliers from his pocket. "I'll just work on your fingernails with these and see if that'll help you talk."

Ed Renfrew gave a rumbling roar: "Stand away from him! Get your hands up!"

PENNYWEIGHT SEARLES whirled with the speed of a coiled rattlesnake. Starlight glittered on a blue revolver barrel in his hand. Orange flame spat out at Ed Renfrew.

Jim Lane drew both legs up and kicked Pennyweight's feet from under him, just as Renfrew jerked both triggers. The old Chinese house rocked with sound, with frantic commands, with Pennyweight's ratlike squeaks of terror. Pennyweight scrambled to his feet and turned to the window opening.

Pliocene was scrambling through that. With a high-pitched cry of desperation, Pennyweight swerved, charged for the door. His revolver started a chattering roar.

Pliocene leaped from the window sill, landed on Pennyweight's back. They smacked into the side of the doorway, stumbled out into the open. Ed Renfrew clubbed his shotgun and swung viciously.

Pennyweight slipped. The two turned sideways. Pliocene got a glancing blow from the shotgun butt on the shoulder. Pennyweight struggled to throw Pliocene over his head and they both fell to the ground, rolled—and went tumbling down the steep slope into the creek.

Stunned by the fall, Pliocene lit underneath. Pennyweight shoved his head under water, banged his head against the rocky bedrock. Red stars circled dizzily before Pilocene's eyes. Then he called on all his reserves, arched his back and threw the other to one side.

Pennyweight, on his knees in the water, raised his revolver. And just then Ed Renfrew, racing down the creek bank with all the speed and destructiveness of a rock slide, jumped and landed squarely on Pennyweight. The intruder went limp.

Pliocene got up dizzily. Highgear came panting up, yelled to know what the shooting was about. He untied Jim Lane. Ed Renfrew hauled Pennyweight out of the creek and seemed sorry that he was unconscious and couldn't fight any more.

(Continued on page 97)

Jo Carpenter, Dean Owen and Everett Webber.

January *Star Western* — On Sale Now!

THE STRIP'S TOO HOT FOR BLONDES!

A Frontier Saga

by Leslie Ernenwein

Also in January's action-jammed magazine you'll receive Western stories, both long and short, by such top-hand authors as Ray Townsend, Talmage Powell, Joseph Chadwick, John

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ALL STORIES NEW ALL STORIES COMPLETE

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Black John's Banshee Bargain

By James B. Hendryx

Uproarious Gold-Town Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

Lots of Luck—All Bad!

BLACK JOHN SMITH pushed open the door of the Tivoli Saloon in Dawson and strolled to the bar. He placed one foot on the rail, one elbow on the mahogany, and called loudly for the best damn drink in the house. The bartender rushed down the bar to fill his order, and one of the men in the stud poker game across the room glanced up at the sound of his voice and greeted him.

"I say! Smith, old chap!" He waved to Black John. "How are you?"

Black John picked up his glass, strolled

"Damn it, you couldn't have lost!" Camillo Bill spluttered. "You had him beat all the time!"

Black John Smith used black cats, broken mirrors and magic incantations in selling his worthless gold claim. But the final touch came when he brought in—the Rat Creek Banshee!

over to the round table and stood there for a moment, grinning affably. "Hello, Lordship," he said. "Looks like you've fell amongst evil companions." The grin widened as his glance swept the eyes of the sourdoughs who smiled up at him from beneath low-drawn hat brims.

"Nonsense, these are all good fellows," exclaimed the Englishman. "Gentlemen, allow me to introduce my friend—"

"Never mind namin' him, Dook," laughed old Bettles. "We've know'd that reprobate ever since he stuck up the American Army over to Fort Gibbon an' walked off with their payroll."

"YOU kin buy into this game fer a round of drinks," Camillo Bill told Black John with a grin. "Six-handed is better'n five."

"Shore," seconded Bettles. "Buy yerself a couple of stacks of chips and—"

"I s'pose I'd ort to," Black John gave in, "to protect my friend, here."

Moosehide Charlie pointed across the table. "Take a squint at them chips he's got stacked up in front of him, an' you kin damn well see how much protectin' he needs."

"Yeah," echoed Swiftwater Bill, "the Dook takes to stud like a duck to water. We've bin learnin' him the game fer the past month—an' believe me, it's cost us plenty."

"It's a jolly old game, don't you know!" exclaimed the Englishman. "It's the first card that makes it interestin'—the one that the others cawnt see."

"The hell of it is," said old Bettles as he gathered the cards for the deal, "the Dook, here, he takes it off'n us, an' then that damn Cranston comes along an' takes it off'n him."

"Who's Cranston?" asked Black John.

"He's a damn dude chechako that come driftin' in a couple of months ago. He don't do no prospectin'. Jest buys an' sells claims, an' does a lot of gamblin'."

"So, he's bin takin' it off'n you, eh?" asked Black John, glancing toward the Englishman.

"Not at cards," Lordship told him. "This Cranston is a personable fellow, and I mistook him for a gentleman. He bilked me in a business transaction—in the matter of a claim which he had salted. I shall endeavor to get it back from him at cards."

"He's a pretty slick article," advised Bettles. "We'll prob'ly peg his racket, one of these times, but until we do, you better lay off the heavy bettin' when he's got the cards."

"Did he take you fer yer roll?" asked Black John.

The Englishman waved a hand. "Oh dear, no! It was merely a private investment—a matter of some fifteen hundred pounds."

"He's pretty smart," Camillo Bill said. "Accordin' to Curly, he banks anywheres between fifty an' a hundred thousan' in the safe here—dependin' on whether he's heavy on the buyin' or the sellin' end of a deal. If you got a good claim you want to give away . . ."

"You better look out fer him," Moosehide Charlie grinned. "He's slippery. He won't walk right up an' take it off'n you—like you done the Army."

"T'ain't likely," grinned Black John. "But, fact is, I've got a claim to sell, an' he looks like a likely customer. If he has that much money—"

"He won't fall fer no salted claim," opined Swiftwater Bill. "There ain't no use trying to beat a man at his own game."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Black John. "Salt's a funny thing, Swiftwater. Some folks piles it on thick, an' others jest eases it in along with the cookin' till you wouldn't know it was there. You boys all know I've got plenty of dust to spend, an' likewise you all know I wouldn't lie to you. I'm tellin' you now that I've got a damn good claim. I'm tellin' you this, in

case the gent might inquire around. Some folks is partic'lar about the kind of folks they do business with." He grinned. "But I ain't. I'm joinin' yer game."

CRANSTON himself came in a short while later and asked to be let in the game. No one there liked him—they all distrusted his slickness. But, as Camillo Bill said later, there was no way to prove his crookedness except by playing with him and watching him. So they were all silent, and Cranston bought a stack of chips and seated himself.

The play proceeded for a few deals when, with a nine in the hole and a pair of nines showing after the last card had been dealt, Black John raised Camillo Bill's bet of twenty dollars on an exposed pair of jacks. Cranston, with an eight, a ten, a jack, and a queen showing, raised Black John fifty dollars. Camillo Bill studied the cards, and raised a hundred. Black John promptly raised two hundred, and Cranston raised another two hundred. The others had dropped out, and Camillo Bill, noticing that Black John had a handful of important chips ready to toss into the pot, turned down his cards with the remark that if either of the two had that case nine in the hole, he was beaten.

Just as he was about to raise Cranston five hundred, Black John's glance strayed to the bar and became fixed upon the backs of the drinkers. For what seemed interminable moments he stared at the row of backs; then with a muttered curse, he returned the chips to his stack, and flipped over his hole card, exposing his three nines.

"That's good!" he growled, scowling wrathfully toward the bar. "Wouldn't that have to happen jest when I had the chanct to rake in a good pot!"

"What happened?" asked Swiftwater Bill, eyeing the speaker in surprise.

Black John pointed to the opposite side of the room. "Look—thirteen men lined up to the bar! An me with three nines! It couldn't be no other way than Cranston had made his straight!"

With a grin, Cranston flipped over his hole card. It was the trey of spades.

"Of course," said Camillo Bill, sarcastically, "you never noticed that he couldn't possibly have had his straight, bein' as the only nine you didn't have was shinin' up in my hand!"

"That's right," admitted Black John, staring ruefully at the cards. "Mebbe I'd ort to noticed—but, when I seen them thirteen backs lined up again the bar, I know'd I couldn't win."

"Damn it! You couldn't have lost!" Camillo Bill spluttered. "He couldn't have had you beat!"

Black John scowled at the speaker. "The hell I couldn't of lost! I did, didn't I? That proves it: Thirteen's an unlucky number. When I seen them thirteen backs, I know'd I couldn't win! Them thirteen backs was unlucky fer both of us, Camillo, an' you can't get around it. That jest proves that a man's a damn fool that tries to go agin luck."

Puzzled glances passed between the sourdoughs as old Bettles picked up the cards to deal, for Black John was known among them as a past master of the game of stud.

A FEW DEALS later, with only a pair of sixes, an ace, and a four showing, he called Old Bettles's bet of a hundred dollars and turned over his hole card, which was an eight-spot. Bettles, who had bet on a pair of exposed kings, stared in astonishment.

"Didn't you see them pair of kings? What's ailin' you—calling a pair of kings, without nothin' but a pair of sixes. You gone crazy, er what?"

"Let's see yer hole card," demanded Black John gravely.

"What the hell's the hole card got to do with it?" asked Bettles, flipping over

the card that made him two pairs. "Them kings that was starin' you right in the face was enough to beat you!"

Reaching over, Black John picked up the other's hole card and examined it meticulously "It's all right. You win, Bettles. I thought you must of had two cards stuck together in the hole. In which case my pair of sixes would of won, your hand bein' dead."

"Two cards stuck together!" cried Bettles. "What the hell made you think that? My God—bettin' again a shore thing on the chanct that a man's got two cards stuck together in the hole!"

"Nope," replied Black John, with unruffled calm. "It was jest plain common sense. See that cat over there by the bar? Well, you take notice that he's black, don't you? Jest before you bet he crossed the room. He crossed it from this side—from right to left. It's good luck when a black cat crosses from right to left—an' damn bad luck when one crosses from left to right. Accordin' to common sense, I couldn't of lost that pot—an' the only way I could of won it agin them pair of kings would be to have your hand dead. So I figgered, of course, that you must have two cards stuck together in the hole."

"Well, of all the damn fool notions I ever heard, that takes the cake!" cried Swiftwater Bill. "Anyhow, it learnt you a lesson—you kin see what believin' in them damn signs does to a man. How in hell kin a cat crossin' a room make a man win a pot, or lose one?"

"Easy enough," retorted Black John. "It jest made me lose one, didn't it?"

"Yeah—an' it proved there ain't nothin' in them signs."

Black John shook his head. "I've got it!" he exclaimed suddenly. "It was my fault, an' not the cat's! The sign was right—yes, sir—dead right. The sign rightly called fer me losin' that pot—only I read it wrong. It's like this—the left side of a room is the side on yer left when you come in the door. I'm settin' facin' the door, so the left side to me, is really the right side of the room. What that cat really done was to cross from left to right, an' that's bad luck—jest exactly which it proved to be! Boys, you can't beat old man luck. I've proved it a couple of times right here at this table. Come on, Camillo—it's your deal!

OTHER glances, glances of real concern, passed between the sourdoughs as the game proceeded, for Black John was a general favorite among them, despite his openly avowed robbery of an Army payroll.

But a short time later, after all the others had dropped out of a hand which Cranston had persistently raised, Black John faced the man with only a pair of tens showing in his own hand, against four exposed hearts in Cranston's. Instead of checking, Black John made a substantial bet, which Cranston promptly raised. Black John studied the cards, rose abruptly, walked around his chair, and then scratched his nose.

"I'm callin' that," he said. "It takes every damn chip I've got."

Cranston flipped over the fifth heart, and Black John nodded. "That's good," he said. "I figgered you had me beat, an' I was jest about to fold my hand, when my nose itched me. When yer nose itches you, it's good luck if you git up an' walk around yer chair before you scratch it. That there one ain't no shore sign—like number thirteen, an' black cats—it's jest tol'able. I could never of won that pot, if I'd scratched my nose before I walked around my chair, but walkin' around it like I done—it give me a chanct. Well, I'll be quittin' now. I'm broke."

"Here, Smith!" exclaimed the Englishman, "I'll lend you all you want! Glad to do it, don't you know!"

Others, also, offered to stake him, but Black John refused to borrow. "No,

thanks, boys—it ain't lucky to play borrowed money when the moon's on the wane. When the moon changes, it will be different. Borrowed money wanes with the moon—an' it waxes with it, too. It's jest like workin' a claim—I don't never work a claim on the wane of the moon. It would shore peter out on me—an' a man's a damn fool to go contrary to the signs. That's why there ain't more rich folks—most of 'em don't know the signs. An' the others don't give a damn. You cleaned me out this trip. But I'll be back. Day after tomorrow I'll hit out fer my claim an' I'll sluice some dust. I'd go tomorrow, but it's the thirteenth of the month, an' I wouldn't start nowheres on the thirteenth. I'll git to the claim by the turn of the moon, an' I'll work it till the moon turns agin—an' come back. I'll have plenty of dust by then, an' I'll be back in the game—an' it won't be with no piddlin' little two thousand', neither."

When he had gone, Cranston turned to Bettles. "Who is this bird, Smith, anyhow?" he asked. "Has he really got a claim that he can sluice out better than two thousand in a couple of weeks?"

"Must have," replied Bettles. "He's always got plenty of dust on him, an' he seems to have plenty of time on his hands. It's probably like he says—he only works on the up of the moon."

"Where is this claim?"

"Damn if I know." Bettles shrugged. "Black John lives up on Halfaday Crick. It's prob'ly up around there, somewheres. I'd shore like to buy that claim off'n him. It must be a whopdollager, wherever it is."

"Halfaday Crick! Isn't that the place where all those outlaws hang out?"

"Well—not all of 'em. There's quite a few there, so the talk goes. Black John's one hisself. The rumors is that he held up the Army one time an' stole the payroll."

"What—that dumb egg cop off an Army payroll! They must have left it hanging on a bush somewhere, if he got away with it! I've seen superstitious men before—but never one like him! He's not only superstitious, but just plain dumb along with it."

"I've know'd John fer quite a while," said Moosehide, "an' I never noticed he was so—"

"Oh—shore!" exclaimed Bettles, loudly. "He's the damnest, superstitionest man I ever seen. Ain't he Camillo?"

"He shore is," agreed Camillo Bill. "His damn superstition cost me a good pot."

"Yeah, but it cost him more'n that," reminded Swiftwater Bill. "He bought a couple of thousand-dollar stacks when he set in."

"I wonder if he'd sell that claim?" asked Cranston.

"Well," replied Bettles, "a man will sell anythin' he's got, if the price is right. It must be an awful good claim—he shore spends a sight of dust, an' it don't seem to bother him none."

"I'd hunt him up an' make him an offer, right now," said Cranston, "but I've got a hunch to wait around till he shows up a couple of weeks from now, and see if he really has cleaned up a big bunch of dust. Do you think he'll come back?"

"Shore, he'll come," replied Bettles. "He said he would, didn't he? Well, when Black John says he'll be back in this stud game after he's gone an' sluiced out some more gold, he'll be back. If you'd care to risk a few ounces er so on him not showin' up, I'll take you on."

"You know him better than I do," replied Cranston. "We'll just wait an' see. I certainly would like to make a deal with him for that claim. I wish I knew him as well as you men do."

"You will," grinned Bettles. "Black John ain't hard to git acquainted with. In fact, you'll prob'ly know him better'n

we do. We ain't never had no business dealin's with him. Our contacts has bin what you might say—social."

CHAPTER TWO

Salting the Claim

BLACK JOHN stepped through the doorway of Cushing's Fort, the trading post and saloon that ministered to the needs of the little outlawed band that gathered on Halfaday Creek, close against the Alaskan-Yukon border. He sauntered to the bar, where the proprietor was already setting out a bottle and two glasses.

"Say, Cush, kin you howl like a banshee?" he asked, as he poured a drink.

Old Cush, the somber-faced proprietor, filled his own glass and regarded the other with suspicion. "What," he asked warily, "is a banshee? An' why would it howl?"

"Why would a wolf howl?" Black John asked. "It howls because it's s'posed to."

"But ain't a banshee a kind of a ghost, er somethin'?" Cush asked. "And how the hell can a ghost howl?"

"How would I know how they do it?" Black John shrugged. "I ain't never bin one."

"Yeah—well, yer damn liable to be, if you go pullin' any of yer damn jokes on me."

Black John grinned. "The joke ain't goin' to be on you, Cush. It's on someone else. Fact is, I'm figgerin' on pullin' off a drama."

"Not by a damn sight!" Cush snapped. "Not with me in it, you ain't! You can't even pull one off in this saloon! I've had enough of yer damn dramas! Twice now you've got me mixed up in them. If anythin' had went wrong that first time, I'd of got shot—an' the other time I'd of got married to the damnedest old hellion that ever walked on two legs!"

"Listen, Cush, it ain't goin' to be in the saloon. This here's a open-air drama. An' I ain't even cast you fer a prominent part. All you got to do is git out on a ridge an' howl like a banshee."

"Yeah—an' some damn fool will think it's a wolf an' take a shot at me!"

"No, it'll be at night. The chances is, they couldn't see their sights."

"Yeah, the 'chances is'!" Cushing growled. "You're damn long on chances, John—when it's me that's takin' 'em."

"There'll be money in it fer you. I'll pay you a hundred dollars jest to git out on a ridge an' howl like a banshee fer a few minutes. You couldn't make a hundred dollars no easier."

"What good would that do you?" the barkeep asked.

"Well—" Black John rubbed his chin, smiled faintly to himself. "It might help me sell a claim. You know, I'm superstitious as hell, an' I might not like a claim if it's in the vicinity of banshees."

Black John casually poured himself another drink, and old Cush promptly did likewise. Then, reaching onto the back bar, he entered the two drinks against Black John's account. "I never noticed that you was so damn superstitious," he said.

"I didn't use to be, but I am now," Black John explained. "It's like a disease—it creeps up slow on some folks, whilst others gits a hell of a dose of it all to onct, like I done. Do you want to earn that hundred? You could git down behind a rock when you howl, so no one could hit you, even if it was light."

"But I don't know what one of 'em howls like," protested the unwilling Cush.

"Then howl like you kin, an' I'll tell you if it sounds right."

"When?" asked Cush, in vast disgust.

"Right now," Black Jack suggested seriously. "We might's well rehearse when there ain't no one else around."

"You'd be makin' a damn fool of me," Cush objected. "An' besides, some of the

boys might hear it an' think I was gittin' murdered."

"I couldn't make no damn fool of you, Cush. An' what do you care what the boys think—they'd know different when they got here. I'll tell 'em you was singin'. Go ahead, an' we'll hear what it sounds like."

THROWING back his head, old Cush let out a tentative howl. Black John scowled his displeasure. "Hell, you don't call that howlin', do you? It wasn't hardly no more than a cross between a growl an' a squeak. Fill yer lungs with wind an' howl!"

Cush complied, and Black John thumped the bar in disgust. "That was only a common holler! When I say howl, I mean howl! This here howl you've got to give has got to be as loud as you kin make it, an' it's got to be a combination of a scream an' a screech an' a shriek an' a squeal, an' it's got to kind of peter off into a cross between a whine an a moan. That's a howl. Don't you git the idee?"

"No," grumbled Cush. "You ought to git some woman to do it. A man can't make no such sound! "

"You go ahead an' practice," urged Black John, "an' you'll make it, all right. If you git it down real good, I'll double yer pay."

"I won't make no damn fool, nor yet no target of myself, fer wages," rebelled Cush. "You aim to sell the claim. Well, I'll howl fer a percent, or nothin'."

"All right, all right!" agreed Black John. "Ten percent if it's a deal—nothin' if it ain't. An' nothin' if you don't put up a good convincin' howl."

"I'll let out the damnedest noise I kin think of," promised Cush, "an' if it don't sound exactly like one of these here ghosts you was tellin' about, it'll sound like somethin' jest as bad. What ridge have I got to howl off'n? An what night?"

"There ain't no hurry. We've got a couple of weeks yet. It'll be the ridge that runs along Rat Creek. I've still got the papers fer that claim. An' there's a pole shack on it, with a stove an' a few dishes I left there."

Old Cush shook his head in disapproval. "There wasn't a damn one of them claims on Rat Crick that paid even wages. If I was you, John, I'd let someone else cheat folks on worthless claims. That's downright ornery. Where's these here, now—ethics you're always hollerin' about?"

"The p'int is well taken," Black John said. "An' in the main, I agree with you. But I claim it's a damn poor ethic that won't work both ways. You know damn well that I wouldn't stoop to cheat even a chechako on a worthless claim. But the gent I'm layin' fer is a low-down, bottom-dealin' claim-saltin' tinhorn who's so steeped in sin it's drippin' out of his ears.

"You rec'lect that Lordship saved my life one time. Well, this here damn skunk beat Lordship out of fifteen hundred pound on a salted claim. An' I deem it an act of gratitude to bust him flat—not out of revenge entirely—but to keep him from workin' on other pore chechakos. If he ain't got no capital, he can't deal in no more claims."

"I see," said Cush. "An' was you figgerin' on returnin' Lordship his fifteen hundred, in case you succeed?"

"I wouldn't hardly go that far," Black John admitted. "The way I figger, it would be a distinct unkindness to Lordship to give him back them pounds. A man profits by the mistakes he makes. The lessons that don't cost him nothin', he soon fergits. As fer as I kin see, the only profit Lordship got off'n the deal is the lesson he learnt. An' if I was to nullify the lesson, by returnin' them pounds, it would wipe out Lordship's entire profit on the transaction. An' besides—it would cut into your percent."

"That's so," agreed Cush. "You'd ort to bin a preacher, John, the way you go

after the sinful. But what about the rest of this here drama? All you've told me, so fer, is where I've got to howl some night on a ridge."

"That's enough fer you to know, Cush," Black John told him. "There ain't no use gummin' up what brains you've got with complications. If a man of limited intelligence only knows one thing, the chances is he'll go an' do that thing. But if his brain was to git all cluttered up with a lot of disrelated facts, there's no tellin' what he might do."

TWO WEEKS later, after a week of torrential rain, old Cush accompanied Black John to Rat Creek, a small stream that ran parallel to Halfaday, some ten miles to the northward. Two years before, someone had made a strike on the creek, and the men of Halfaday had stampeded and staked it for miles. But the strike proved to be only a shallow pocket, and the claims were abandoned. As the two topped the ridge that bounded the little valley, old Cush gave vent to an exclamation.

"Hell's fire!" he said. "Them rains shore raised the devil with this crick! The valley must of run a reg'lar flood. Look at them sluices all washed slaunchways. An' the shafts is all full of water. An' half of the shacks is washed away."

"It shore don't look like no goin' proposition," admitted Black John, "but mebbe it's better the way it is. We'll go down an' look over my claim."

As Cush had said, the creek had risen out of its banks, flooding the valley from rim to rim, and had then receded, leaving the abandoned sluices and shacks in sorry disarrangement. Black John's claim was located close against the rock wall, at a sharp bend of the creek. His shack had withstood the flood, though some six inches of sand had been deposited over the floor, the table and bench were overturned, and the cooking utensils were strewn about, half buried in the sand. Near the water-filled shaft, the rude sluice had been damaged, and jammed down against the tailing dump.

Stepping to the lip of the shaft, Black John stood staring down into the water. "This shaft is about ten foot deep," he said. "Bein' full of water, a man couldn't git down in it till it's pumped, or bailed out. So, if he wanted to know what's at the bottom of it, he'd fasten a bucket on the end of a pole an' scrape him up a sample. An', he'd stand on this side on account of the dump bein' so clost to the other side that he might slip in. In order that he wouldn't go to all that trouble fer nothin' an' be disapp'inted in the results, I'll jest give him somethin' to look at when he raises his bucket."

Producing a small moosehide pouch from his pocket, Black John untied the thong and allowed the yellow grains to trickle slowly into the shaft. "There's thirty ounces fer him to work on," he said, as he returned the empty sack to his pocket. "That ort to gladden the heart of anyone—comin' unsight an' unseen right out of the water, thataway."

"Yeah," agreed old Cush, "that had ort to be plenty to salt a shaft with. I thought you was goin' damn lib'ral on the salt when you draw'd them hundred an' sixty ounces out of the safe. What in hell you goin' to do with the rest of it?"

"Oh, that's jest property."

" 'Course it's property. An' damn good property. But—"

"I'm usin' the word professional like," explained Black John, as he tossed a few shovelsful of gravel into the shaft. "Meanin' it's part of the setup fer this here drama of mine. Listen, an' I'll give you a few simple instructions which, if you should fergit any of 'em you don't git no ten percent, no matter how good you howl. I'm hittin' from here to Dawson. In due time I'll be back along with this here tinhorn, named Cranston. We'll show up at

the saloon, an' you'll set up the drinks—"

"Uh-huh—I thought it would be somethin' like that."

"An' then him an' I will buy, an' we'll git to talkin'—casual, like folks do. An' you kind of work in a remark or two about me bein' superstitious—kid me about it, or somethin'. Also you want to bring it in about me bein' damn lucky to have the good claim on Rat Crick. An' if I ask you how much I banked in yer safe, you say 'a hundred and thirty ounces.' An' then you tell me that whilst I was down to Dawson you was over Rat Crick way, huntin' moose, an' you seen where the high water had flooded all them abandoned shafts—an' mine along with 'em. I'll let on like it was news to me, like the high water come after I'd went back to Dawson, an' I'll growl about my luck, like a man would, on account of havin' to bail out my shaft. Then me an' Cranston'll hit out fer the claim, an' you foller. I'll time it so we'll git there in time fer him to rig up a bucket on a pole an' scrape him up a couple of samples before dark. When it gits good an' dark, me an' him will go into the shack an' eat supper, an' then I'll step to the door an' light my pipe. When you see the flare of the match, you howl—an' by God, you make it sound turrible! You'll be hidin' there in them rocks on the ridge above the cabin, an' me bein' so damn superstitious, I'll hit right out fer Dawson, an' Cranston'll come, too."

"But—s'pose he don't go with you?"

"He'll go with me, all right," grinned Black John. "He won't let me out of his sight. I'll tell him I wouldn't spend another night on that damn claim fer all the gold in the world, an' I'm hittin' to Dawson to sell the damn claim to old Bettles."

"An' when you git there, you'll sell it to him, instead?" The bartender began to catch on.

"You guessed it, first crack out of the box. An', by the way, there's one more little item. You might camp on the claim that night, an' in the mornin' you take that bucket an' salvage what you kin of that dust I poured down the shaft. I've heard it's bad luck to waste salt."

CHAPTER THREE

The Rat Creek Banshee

AT THE MOUTH of Henderson Creek, Black John camped for a few hours and hired some Indians to collect a few pounds of copper nuggets which abound there. These he placed in little sacks, with a mixture of sand and gravel, and proceeded on his way.

At Dawson, he stopped for a few moments at the detachment of the Northwest Mounted Police, where Corporal Downey weighed these sacks, accepted royalty on two hundred and sixty ounces of dust, and issued a receipt therefore, never suspecting that anyone would tender the fifteen percent royalty on anything but gold. A few minutes later, Black John tossed the little sacks filled with gravel and copper nuggets into the tall weeds behind some lumber piles and, passing on, entered the doorway of the Tivoli Saloon. Casually he sauntered to the bar where Cranston, who had been idly chatting with the bartender, greeted him cordially.

"Hello, Smith! Back already!"

"Yeah. I come back," replied Black John indifferently as his eyes swept the room. "Where's the boys? I figgered on mebbe gittin' my money back."

"Oh, they'll be along later," Cranston said. "It isn't noon yet. Have a drink." When the glasses were filled, Cranston continued, "Well, did you get out some dust?"

"Yeah, I got out a little," Black John admitted. "It was hotter'n hell down in that shaft, an' I took it easy. Then, one day, I couldn't work because a eagle that was flyin' over dropped a rabbit that he had—an' that's bad luck. I'd of prob'ly

broke my leg, or mebbe even my neck, if I'd worked that day. A man has got to use common sense, even when he's in a hurry to git out dust. Drink up."

They drank and refilled the glasses, and Black John drew a well-stuffed pouch from his pocket and tossed it onto the bar.

"Weigh it out of there," he said to the bartender, "an' have one yerself."

"Did you dig all that since you've been gone?" asked Cranston, eyeing the sack.

"Yeah. I hired me a helper, though, to crank the windlass. I got out more'n that." Producing another pouch he laid it on the bar beside the first.

"What'll they weigh up to?" asked Cranston, striving to curb his excitement.

Placing the sacks on the scales, the bartender announced the result: "Ninety-one ounces. "

"And—how many days did you work?"

"We got in twelve days, the two of us," Black John answered casually. "I paid my helper an ounce a day. It was hot, an' we took it easy. We got out two hundred an' seventy-two ounces, all told."

"Two hundred and seventy-two ounces!"

"Yeah. We'd of got more, if it was cooler. I give him twelve ounces fer workin', an' I always cache half of what I take out, in case I might need it when I git old. It's in Cush's safe up to Halfaday. Then, here's ninety-one ounces that I aim to gamble with, an' the thirty-nine ounces I paid fer the royalty on the two hundred an' sixty ounces. Here's the receipt. I jest got it off'n Corporal Downey."

The man examined the paper, dated that morning, which acknowledged the receipt of thirty-nine ounces of dust in payment of the fifteen percent royalty on two hundred and sixty ounces of gold.

"But," Cranston asked, "if you left this dust up in a safe on Halfaday, how would the police know that you hadn't misrepresented the amount?"

"Downey knows I wouldn't lie to him," Black John said. "It wouldn't do no good, anyhow. He'd weigh up what I had in Cush's safe, the first time he come up there, an' if it didn't check with his record of what I'd paid in, he'd make me come acrost. We work hand in hand with the police, in Halfaday. They know we wouldn't try to put nothin' over."

"Would you consider selling this claim?" Cranston asked.

"Not me!" Black John shook his head. "Bettles, he'd like to git holt of it, but it's a good claim. I mightn't be lucky enough to git another one like it. Bettles ain't made me any definite offer—but he knows I'd hold it awful high."

BLACK JOHN paused and meditatively twirled his liquor glass between finger and thumb. "I might sell, though, if . . ." His voice trailed into silence.

"If—what?" asked Cranston eagerly.

Black John poured and downed another drink. "Be you Irish?" he asked.

"What's that got to do with it? Are you?"

"No, I ain't. But my ma an' pa was. I missed bein' Irish by jest the one generation."

"Owing to some sign, or superstition, I suppose," laughed Cranston, with a wink at the bartender.

"Well," replied Black John gravely. "It might of bin some sign. I was so damn young when I was born, I don't remember. I don't even know if I was lucky or unlucky to of missed it that clost. But, anyhow—if that damn banshee don't quit howlin' nights, I might sell my claim an' git to hell off'n that crick."

"That banshee?" asked Cranston, in evident horror.

"It howls like one."

"Maybe it's a wolf," the claim broker suggested.

"No. I know how wolves howls," Black John said definitely. "This is different. It's a turrible sound. I've heard my ma

an' pa might of bin wrong on banshees."

"No, sir!" Cranston insisted. "They were dead right. There's no superstition about that. It's a known fact. It's too bad your claim had to be on a creek that has a banshee. That would sure raise hell with the price, if you should ever want to sell it."

"I s'pose it would," agreed Black John. "There ain't no one would want to buy onto a crick like that. I don't want to stay on it, neither. I don't want to die."

"Suppose we go up an' look this proposition over," Cranston suggested.

"What's the use?" said Black John, disconsolately. "You wouldn't buy into no banshee. An' I wouldn't want you should. If you should die, I'd think it was my fault."

"Well, of course, I'd be taking a long chance," Cranston admitted. "I couldn't pay much for the claim, under the circumstances. But—if the price was right, I might take a chance."

Black John finally gave in and went out with Cranston. The bartender sadly watched them go. An hour later when old Bettles and Camillo Bill sauntered into the Tivoli, he called them aside. "Say," the bartender began abruptly, "that damn Cranston is goin' to beat Black John Smith out of his claim. Him an' Cranston jest pulled out fer the claim. Black John's a damn good fella. I never know'd he was such a fool—he believes in ghosts, an' such-like—an' he believes that certain things is bad luck. I'll bet that when they git back Cranston'll have Black John's claim."

"I wouldn't wonder if he would," grinned Bettles, with a wink at Camillo Bill.

OLD CUSH set out a bottle and three glasses as Black John Smith entered the saloon on Halfaday, closely followed by a stranger.

"Hello, Cush," greeted Black John. "I'd like fer you to meet up with my friend Cranston. Me an' him's goin' over to the claim."

"Yer claim's under water," informed Cush. "I was huntin' over Rat Crick way, a few days back. There was some turrible rains in the hills, an' them Rat Crick shafts is all full of water."

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Black John. "I know'd I was due fer bad luck. Rec'lect, Cranston, that noon I upset the salt, comin' up? I told you, then, that it meant bad luck! Did it wash the shack away, Cush?"

"No, but it covered the floor with sand, an' it worshed yer sluice around slaunchways."

"I'm glad I only upset the salt onct," said Black John, wiping his brow.

"Yer luck ain't so bad," consoled Cush. "Hell—if I had a claim which I could bank a hundred an' thirty ounces right here in the safe, an' take another hundred an' thirty down to Dawson with me, an' pay a man besides—all in twelve days—I wouldn't figger my luck was runnin' so bad. An' the only good claim on the crick, to boot. Would you, stranger?"

"A man would be a fool not to believe in them sayin's," put in Black John. "I never know'd one not to come true."

Cranston peered into the mirror and ran his fingers gingerly over his cheek. "I wonder if you'd mind if I'd shave in here?" he asked. "This damned stubble makes my face itch."

"Go right ahead," said Cush. "I'll have the swamper fetch you some hot water, an' you kin shave on the end of the bar."

Black John was an interested spectator. "It's bad luck to shave," he opined. "I know'd a fella onct whose beard had grow'd fer ten year, an' the day after he shaved, the law got him."

"The law!"

"Yeah—before that, they didn't know it was him."

Cranston laughed. "Well, I'll take a chance. The police aren't hunting for me."

"Nice-lookin' glass you've got," opined Black John, picking up the small silver-framed mirror that the man had set up on the bar. He was looking at himself in the glass when it slipped from his fingers and shivered into a hundred pieces against the brass footrail. Black John jumped back in dismay, stared at the splintered glass in wide-eyed horror. "Jehosaphat!" he gasped. "I've raised hell shore enough!"

Cranston smiled. "Never mind, Smith. Accidents will happen. The thing was of no particular value."

"To hell with the value!" cried Black John. "I'll pay you whatever it's worth! But—I've broke a mirror! Seven years of bad luck—on top of what I've had! Seven years! An' no gittin' out of it! I'll bet my banshee charm won't work a lick now!"

"Did you have a charm?" asked Cranston.

"Yeah—I sent a hundred dollars down to Madam Grizeldy in Seattle. It was in a little kind of a box, which she said I dasn't open er it wouldn't work. It come to Dawson, an' I fetched it up, last trip. I buried it like she said, an' all them twelve days me an' the man was on the claim, the damn banshee never let out so much as a yip. I figgered, mebbe, I had it beat, but now—seven years of bad luck! If that damn thing howls tonight, I'll know it ain't no use. I'll hit straight fer Dawson an' sell out the claim to old Bettles. He'll give me a good price—an' he don't know about the banshee! Come on—let's git it over with. I ain't got the heart to drink no more licker."

HOURS later, as the sun was topping the western hills, Black John and Cranston entered the little valley at Rat Creek.

"Old Cush was right," said Black John, as he peered somberly down at his water-filled shaft. "Bad luck follers me whither ever I goest, as the poet would say. Let's git out of this valley. I don't want to be here no more, nights."

"Would you mind if I—er—just sampled a pan or two of gravel from the shaft?" asked Cranston.

"No," replied Black John, wearily. "I wouldn't mind nothin'. But how in hell kin you sample a shaft that's full of water?"

"Here's a bucket," replied Cranston. "How deep is the shaft?"

"Only ten er twelve foot. But it'll be a sight of work bailin' out all that water."

"I wasn't thinking of bailing it out," said Cranston. "You've got a pan here, haven't you?"

"I don't know," replied Black John, lugubriously. "I'd ort to have one in the shack."

"You go look for it while I cut a sapling and fasten the bucket to it," said Cranston, drawing his belt axe.

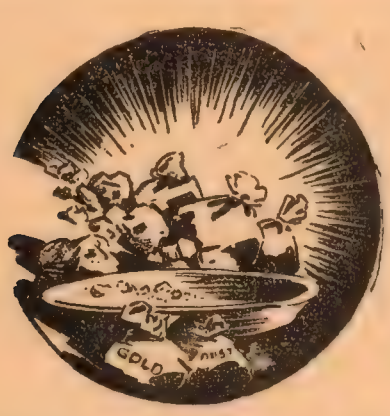
Black John returned a few minutes later with the pan. "I found it," he said, "but my luck is shore runnin' porely. The shack's all messed up, an' everythin' strung all over hell. It'll take a hour to pan the gravel an' git supper—an' then it'll be dark. An' that damn banshee'll prob'ly howl. But it won't git me! Damn if I'll stay here an' die fer no banshee. One squawk out of it tonight, an' I'm gittin' out of here as fast as my legs'll carry me!"

He stood by and watched indifferently as Cranston collected gravel from the bottom of the shaft with his improvised dredge and panned it, his eyes fairly popping from his head at the rich butter-yellow layer that remained in the bottom of each of four test pans. Later, in the cabin, by the light of a candle, he weighed up the dust, while Black John prepared supper. "Seven ounces," he announced.

"Damn near two ounces to the pan!"

"Uh-huh," replied Black John, indifferently. "She's gittin' better as she goes down. I never even got a color out of the top-strippin'. But what good is it, if that charm don't work? Damn if I'll stay here an' die!"

The two ate in silence—Black John in a somber, brooding mood, and Cranston in deep thought. As the meal was finished, Black John paused in the filling of his pipe and assumed a tense, listening attitude. Then, pipe in hand, he stepped



cautiously to the door and threw it open. Silence greeted him as he stood framed in the doorway. He struck a match on the jamb and held it to the bowl of his pipe, and the next instant the silence of the night was shattered by a horrible, prolonged shriek that rose and fell in a sort of weird cadence, and trailed off into an eerie, moaning wail.

WITHOUT so much as a glance toward Cranston, Black John reached for his hat, swung his pack to his shoulders and, bolting from the room, struck off down the valley. Behind him he could hear Cranston's feet thumping the ground as he ran. From time to time the man called, but Black John gave no heed.

Three miles farther on, the fleeing man turned up a shallow draw, and ten minutes later he paused, all out of breath, on the rim of a broad plateau, where Cranston overtook him.

"We're out of the valley!" panted Black John. "We're safe! What did I tell you? Breakin' that lookin' glass knocked Madam Grizeldy's charm all to hell. I'm hittin' fer Dawson to hunt up old Bettles! No more Rat Crick fer me! I'm through!"

"What will you take for your claim?" asked Cranston impatiently.

"Bettles'll give me a hundred thousan'. But, what do you care? Jehosophat, didn't you hear it yell?"

"Yes, but I've got a hunch. . . . I'll give you a hundred thousand, if you'll throw in Madam Grizeldy's address."

"But her damn charm ain't no good!"

"You forget," reminded Cranston, "that I didn't break a mirror. Wouldn't you just as soon sell to me as Bettles?"

"Have you got the cash?"

"I've got seventy-five or eighty thousand in the Tivoli safe. I'll turn that over to you as soon as we hit Dawson, and you give me twenty-four hours to raise the rest. I'll have to sell a few claims I'm holding."

Black John nodded. "Yeah, I'd ruther sell to you than him. You know all about the banshee, an' yer takin' yer own chances. Bettles don't know about it, an' if I was to tell him, he might back out. Bettles ain't no fool—he might not want to die no more'n I do."

"That's right," agreed the other. "I'm satisfied."

"It's a deal, then," said Black John.

* * *

In Dawson Cranston promptly transferred the dust deposited to his credit in the Tivoli safe to Black John. Then, twenty-four hours later, he looked up Black John and called him out of a poker game.

"I couldn't raise but fifteen thousand more in dust," he said. "It's every cent I

(Continued on page 98)

(Continued from page 6)

one of the other ropers, but he had an eye cocked on a cow and calf belonging to one of the Pool outfits. His loop cocked. Dipped down. Pulled taut. Lorne headed for the branding fire with his calf caught by both heels. And he'd call back across his shoulder to finish the talk.

My job was tending the branding fire. My father had given me a brand-new tally book and an indelible pencil. He told me when I started on the roundup that he expected me to keep tally of all the branded calves. Not only the Circle C calf tally, but the Long X and Circle Diamond and P Cross Square, and every iron in the half-dozen brands that made up the Bear Paw Pool.

"One of ourn!" Bill Lorne would sing out as he dragged up his calf. His left

eye winked, a stub of cigarette hung in the twisted grin.

I'd be in a sweat till I got a look at the brand on the cow that had followed her dragged calf to the branding fire. And by that time a Long X roper or a P Cross Square man would drag up another calf. And I'd cuss Bill Lorne for not telling me which one of the Bear Paw Pool brands was on the cow.

A kid on a roundup comes in for a lot of horrawing and deviling. Bill Lorne was the worst of the lot when it came to deviling a kid. He'd get put on early morning circle and he'd take me along. I rode a little fat white cow pony called Snowflake, wiser than a treeful of owls when it came to cow savvy. Bill Lorne would stop in the middle of a word or some yarn. Pull up from a trot. By the time I got Snowflake pulled up, he'd be off his horse and picking up a leg of my white pony. He'd have a sharp rock or a horseshoe nail palmed in advance in his gloved right hand. He'd show it to me.

"Can't you tell, button, when your pony goes lame? You just as well be afoot, as ridin' that Injun pony, as far as that goes. How come the Circle C don't give you a real string of horses to ride? I'd quit that damned outfit. That wagon boss keeps you on dayherd when you're supposed to be learnin' the cow business. They tell me he put you on cocktail and had you called fer last guard. Then moved camp before you got relieved to go to breakfast. Boys already gone on circle. Only thing you could do was go back on dayherd on that same laig-weary white pony. No wonder he's showing signs of ringbone. On all four legs."

BILL LORNE ribbed me into quitting the Circle C and going to work for the Bear Paw Pool—on the promise that the roundup cook always cook a son-of-a-gun in the sack—suet pudding—every night.

He gave me a string of horses. He'd rope a horse out of the cavvy. By the time I got my saddle on, some Pool cowhand would ask me what I aimed to do, steal one of his horses? Did the Circle C send me over to steal horses? Let it go this time. But don't let it happen twice, button.

I'd saddle another Bill Lorne caught for me. One by one the cowhands would quit whatever they were doing to watch me saddle.

"You'd orter know better, Lorne. Stakin' that Circle C kid to a spoiled horse. He'll skull, then come over backwards. Like he done when he ran that

saddlehorn clean through that feller's belly this spring."

When I got my next look at Snowflake there was one of the Pool brands on his left thigh, probably put on by Lorne for a laugh. The brand was just scorched and it haired over in a few weeks but there it was, big as a signboard.

"Least said the better, button," Bill Lorne said. "The feller that owns that white pony is shore ringy. It was his kid's pony. Some 'breeds run him off and sold him to the Circle C. Lucky you ain't up fer horse stealin'."

Bill Lorne helped me steal Snowflake, my own pony, that night, from the Pool remuda. I hightailed it for the Circle C camp. I knew better than to trust him, but I always went back for more of his practical jokes.

Bill Lorne had his own private horse in the Pool cavvy. A strawberry-roan quarterhorse called Corbett, after Jim Corbett, one-time heavyweight champ, noted for his fast footwork and boxing science. Bill Lorne could slip the bridle off Corbett and cut cattle on him or rope off him. Once in a while Lorne would let me ride Corbett. And I'd ride along, watching my shadow.

I had to go back to town to school after the first beef shipment in early September. One evening about supper time the telephone rang and I answered it. That was in late October.

"Is this the Circle C kid?" I knew that voice over the telephone. "This is Lorne, that feller that deviled you so much on the roundup. I stopped over a-purpose fer me'n you to paint the town. You ketch the next street car. I'll be in front of Sid Willis' Mint Saloon." He hung up before I could answer.

I told my mother a lie. I said it was one of the kids asking me for supper. I had enough saved out of my forty-a-month summer's wages to keep up my kid's end

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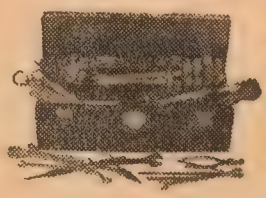

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like a man. Providing Bill Lorne could slip me into a saloon.

Bill was dressed in his store clothes. A new hat and new boots. Shaved and his hair cut, he looked kind of outa place on that street in town. But his new hat was cocked at that jack-deuce angle and a half-smoked cigarette hung from his twisted grin. He had a big heavy-set, red-faced man with him. He looked like some cow-hand that had got himself a job tending bar and had gone paunchy. I never paid him much attention. I was too tickled at seeing Bill Lorne. Prideful that he'd looked me up.

"This is Dutch Shaw. This is on me. It's my night to howl, eh, Dutch?"

Bill Lorne said my money was wooden. We ate the best. Took in the picture show. Wound up in one of the boxes that overlooked the stage at the old Stockholm Beer Hall. I was drinking small beers. Bill Lorne and Dutch Shaw drank whiskey. Between acts, the honkytonk gals would come into the box and Bill Lorne would buy the drinks. I could handle my beer all right for a kid. But I was getting a little tipsy. I thought I saw Bill Lorne sluff a few whiskies into the brass cuspidor when nobody was looking.

I remember one of the girls that did a song and tap dance was drinking sour wine. She was making up to Dutch and they were swapping drinks. It was right after that Dutch sorta dozed off. Bill Lorne let him sleep a while, then tried to shake him awake. But he wouldn't wake up. I saw Bill Lorne slip the girl a ten-dollar bill.

Then he called a bouncer and they carried Dutch out the back door. A cab was waiting out in the alley. The driver never left his seat. Bill Lorne and the bouncer loaded Dutch in. Lorne told me to ride up with the cab driver. I thought Bill Lorne was smart-aleck drunk when he told the driver to take them to the jail.

Then he grinned that twisted grin that closed his left eye.

"Jail's the safest place for a drunk. Nobody kin roll him."

A cop on night duty helped Bill Lorne carry the still-unconscious Dutch inside. Bill Lorne was gone for quite a while. He told me to sit in the cab with him while we drove around to grab some fresh air. I sat alongside him, and for the first time I noticed that Lorne packed a gun in a holster shoved inside his pants and fastened on to the suspender buttons.

Bill Lorne asked the cab driver what time the eastbound train left. He said it was due in half an hour. If he wanted to be on it he'd have to whip up. We had driven out to Black Eagle Falls. We made the train just in time.

"I left the Corbett roan in the Circle C horse pasture," Bill Lorne told me as we neared the depot at three in the morning. "He's all yourn, button. Take care of him."

I tried to thank him for showing me a good time. But he just grinned that twisted grin that winked his left eye, his hat cocked at a jack-deuce angle on his black head.

"The honor," he grinned, the laughter showing in his eyes, "is all mine. So-long, Kid. You and that Corbett pony take good care of one another."

Bll Lorne caught the last car as the train was pulling out. He straddled the iron railing of the observation car like he was sitting a horse, half-rumped, his weight in one stirrup, as he waved his hand.

That was the last I ever saw of the man who went under the name of Bill Lorne when he worked for the Bear Paw Pool.

I WAS in school next morning when I was called out of the classroom and into the principal's office. Tom Cook, the chief of police, was sitting there. Alongside him sat Dutch Shaw. Dutch's

red face was mottled and he looked sick. He pointed a fat finger at me.

"That's the same kid. He was there when my drink was doped. Like as not he helped swipe my gun and badge and papers and my wallet. What's become of that feller you called Bill Lorne?" His voice sounded thick.

"I don't know. I had too much beer to drink. I went home to bed." I hadn't told any direct lie. But I wouldn't tell the truth, if they locked me in jail for the rest of the school term.

Chief of Police Cook had known me since I was this high. He never asked a queston. But he said a few caustic words to Dutch Shaw about upholding the dignity of a law officer. Then they left. And after the principal had lectured me for a while on the evils of drink and so on, I was sent back to my classroom.

I found out later that Dutch Shaw was a deputy sheriff from Wyoming. Bill Lorne was a member of a notorious outlaw gang that Dutch had picked up in Montana and was taking back under arrest to the Wyoming penitentiary. Lorne had used me for an excuse. He'd swapped identities with the deputy sheriff in the taxicab.

I had the roan horse, Corbett, three years before a man showed up to claim ownership, and I had to buy the cow pony for a highway robbery price.

I got a picture postcard that same year from the Argentine Republic. It was a picture of a big herd of fat cattle on the Pampas. "Don't hold no hard feelings towards old Lorne. These cattle are all mine. We'll paint Buenos Aires a shore red color if you ever git down this way."

Well, *Compadres,* that's about all until next month—December 21st.

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Walt.

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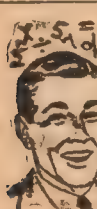

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(Continued from page 35)

the ragged, swaying man. Bill's gun blazed fire. Three other men, near the skiff that had somehow landed from somewhere, were shooting at the scarecrow man and Bill Benton.

ONE by one the three men went down. Now only Bill Benton and the ragged, scarecrow man were on their feet. Bill Benton was holding the other man in his arms, easing him to the ground.

Through the misty alcoholic daze that enveloped him, Major Bacon, who had consumed most of the demijohn of whiskey he had found in his skiff that had not been stolen, but removed and hidden in another brushy place, heard words.

"We got 'em, Bill," Buckshot Blue's voice said.

"Got 'em, Buck."

"Skelton and Purcell and a killer, Bill." Buck's voice was coming weak. "Tell Wong and Baldy so-long. They never liked me, but it don't count now. Whiskey sure made me loco, after I got crippled. That bad money my brother was trying to pass is in a gunnysack at the Bacon ranch, buried in the manger. Third stall on the right. String your bets with Judge Burns, Bill. The best of everything to Anne and you. You both have it comin'. And whenever you ride up on Benton Butte think of me."

"You bet I will, Buck," Bill promised solemnly.

Their hands gripped there in the moonlight.

"We always were in the first money, Bill, team tyin'."

"You always were a champ, Buck."

Buck's marred face grimmed. His hand slid from Bill Benton's grip. And, after a long time, Bill took off his coat to cover the face of the dead man. . . .

THE END

(Continued from page 43)

tote me some on the end of that rope."

"Me tote you!" Tyson boomed. Then his lids slipped low and heavily over his eyes, and he watched Morgan with speculation.

"So ya figure we're that near?" he asked, his gaze drifting across to the rancher's canteen.

"Four or five miles, the way we're traveling," Morgan nodded. His face looked old and gaunt.

"Yeah, I'll tote yuh for a price," Tyson said softly. "I'll tote yuh for yer shirt and vest, Morgan."

MORGAN looked at him. He was a cowman, and he was hard and ruthless and cold. But when he wanted a man dead, he shot him. And he shot him in the front, with a chance to draw.

His eyes spoke his contempt of what he thought, and then he nodded, and stripped off his shirt and vest. The whole damned desert was burning in his shoulder now. His legs were blistered and raw. He felt the heat smash against his torso with a pounding impact. It had been hot before. It was searing, now.

He made a slip loop around his waist, so that Tyson could not jerk him on his face from ahead. Tyson watched him and his lips twitched once. They staggered ahead, the sand sucking at their boots and dragging them down like an undertow. Sand had filled between the violently colored, packed mass of hills. They were small hills, but steep and without footing. They were bunched together like a pile of peas, and they had to go around every hill. The heat reflected off the sands beneath them and from the hills on every side. It burned and twisted in wild yellow, and brown, and orange that flamed to the heavens. The haze was dense as heavy snow.

The sun moved slowly on, and Morgan

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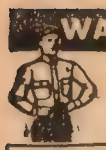

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caught his shadow. He yelled for a stop, but the yell was a bare, choked whisper in his throat. Tyson came back to watch, his tongue swollen and parched between his lips. His eyes held a vicious look. He stood there, swaying, his gaze on the movements of Morgan's hand, and on the knife.

He looked at Morgan's bad arm, and his lips peeled back in a vicious grin. He studied him, and knew he was about gone. But he was badly shot himself, and Morgan had the knife. The knife he no longer cared about. It was the water Tyson wanted, that precious mouthful that would carry him on to the rim while Morgan choked out there in the desert.

Morgan had to struggle to his feet. He stood there, swaying, forcing his fevered, swollen eyes into focus. "We're near," he rasped. "Due straight ahead should be the—"

Tyson stepped in fast and jerked loose the canteen. He grated, "That's all I wanted to know!"

He moved way back, out of reach of Morgan's knife reach. The rancher was too spent for a clean throw.

"Wait!" Morgan cried. "We've got to have that water!"

"Ya mean, *I* got to have it!" Tyson corrected.

Morgan said, "You'll be alone, Tyson! Not even the coyotes or the buzzards will come out to visit you before you're gone!"

"I'll get along without 'em until I hit the rim!" Tyson gritted. "I'll give yore compliments to the gals back in town, Goodyboy Morgan!" He stood, chuckling deep in his chest, and the sounds came raw and thick from his throat. His eyes were burning red slits.

He drank off half the water, then hooked the canteen over his shoulder. He picked up the lariat and threw it at Morgan's feet. "Ya can pull yerself home with that!" he said.

MORGAN watched him turn and stumble off into the writhing heat ahead. A cold expression was on Morgan's face, and the light reflected from the gray of his eyes in icy shafts. He looked at his knife, and a single note of grim humor tore from his raw throat.

Stooping, he picked up his make-shift compass and headed due east. Twice he stopped to take fresh bearings, not perfect, but good enough for his purposes. He stumbled, and pulled himself up, and stumbled again. His senses were leaving him now. The pain was not even so great. It would be nice just to lie there that way and let the sun bake him to sleep.

The going was slow and painful, but he forced himself to crawl. He thought it might as well be this way as any other. If a man died with his boots on, it didn't matter much how he died.

He felt giddy, knew that hell itself was taking possession of his senses. He felt as if he were climbing an arroyo, and that the cool shadows were so soft it did not matter about the stones. He laughed, knowing it was fever, and kept on climbing into that cool space where he could smell grass and trees, and where suddenly he could douse his head in water. . . .

Time passed endlessly, and then he was looking up into the sunset sky, and there was a mirage. There was Skinner Wiley, the stage driver, with his head right over him, and cursing a vivid blue streak.

"So I got here?" Morgan whispered painfully.

"Never mind that," Skinner growled. "You was tellin' about Bat Tyson. Where'd he go?"

"Oh, Bat!" Morgan whispered. "He didn't wait to hear me out. He went straight ahead—right smack onto the Snake Finger desert."

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(Continued from page 61)

alive only by hate and a fierce desire for vengeance. Tonto dismounted, circled through the cedars and eased stealthily down into the hollow a hundred yards above the spot where Trigger Tolliver lay.

THERE he paused, hidden in the inky shadows of tangled cedars. A white moon had rolled into the sky and was slanting silvery rays of light into the hollow. One of these rays picked out the gaunt, sinister figure of Pete Worls as he strode swiftly along the gulch; another touched the grim, motionless body of Trigger Tolliver lying beside a sandstone boulder.

Body tense, Tonto Red watched. He saw Worls approach the body of the man he had treacherously shot. Saw him stoop, his hand reaching eagerly for the paper on the ground beside Tolliver.

There was a sudden blur of movement beside the boulder. Pete Worls straightened, cursing bitterly as he realized he had been tricked, hand stabbing for his gun. But he was too late. A jetting tongue of orange flame licked upward viciously into the lanky killer's stomach.

Pete Worls tumbled over backwards, dead before he hit the ground. Trigger Tolliver raised himself on an elbow, staring at the man he had killed. Then he sighed, dropped back to the ground and lay still.

Tonto Red whispered something as he stared up into the starry sky, aware that a vast contentment had purged his heart of its terrible bitterness. He climbed slowly out of the death-haunted hollow and returned to his horse.

A while later, Johnny Winters, rancher, alias Tonto Red, rode southward through the night. Southward toward the Buckhorn Hills country and the girl who waited there. . . .

TWO MEN—ONE TOWN!

(Continued from page 73)

"Don't you dare say a word about my well," he whispered to Pliocene. The young man nodded and smiled.

The partners drew off a little to one side. Pilocene explained quickly what had happened. "I see the whole picture now," he said. "Ed Renfrew found an old creek channel when he was digging that well. The old gravels were rich with reddish gold. He knew Jim Lane was having tough sledding, so he'd slip over at night and plant some of his own gold in Jim Lane's sluices!"

"Whew!" marveled Highgear. "And we thought he was highgrading. Well, now we can go on with our town." He glanced over to where the old-timers were tying up Pennyweight for delivery to the sheriff. They seemed strangely subdued.

"We've played the dickens with them," he observed.

"Meaning what?" asked Pliocene.

"It's your turn to take a course in human nature," grinned Highgear. "Don't you see—they enjoy fighting, or pretending to. That's their way of enjoying each other's company. Now that they're supposed to be on good terms, they don't know what to do with themselves. It's too bad."

Sudden loud angry voices cut in on his words.

"I tell you my foot slipped!" Ed Renfrew shouted. "That's the reason I missed."

"Huh!" squawked Jim Lane. "Better put a bayonet on that scattergun of yours. Maybe you could get something that way, you ingrown, hide-bound, limp-eared—" He choked and sputtered to a complete stop, waving his arms frantically.

"Jackass!" roared Jim Lane.

Highgear and Pliocene exchanged glances and grinned. All was peaceable and quiet around Fools' Gold.

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(Continued from page 87)

can rustle, beg, borrow or steal. How about it? Can't you take my I.O.U. for ten thousand? I'll promise to pay with the first ten thousand I take out of the claim. You've got ninety thousand in dust."

"Well," considered Black John, "I don't like to be hard on a man. Go ahead—write her out. It's a deal."

With the I.O.U. in his hand, Black John turned to Cranston. "Come on over to the table an' I'll buy a drink. The boys'll be glad to hear of our little deal. Corporal Downey's settin' in with us tonight. He don't play very often."

"Sure thing!" agreed Cranston. "But I'm afraid I can't play. I'm broke—and will be till I can get back up to Rat Creek and take some gold out of that claim."

"Boys," announced Black John, as the two paused beside the table, "I jest sold my Rat Crick claim to Cranston. I wanted you all should know about it, so if anythin' should come up that mebbe didn't look jest right—like I'd took advantage of him, or somethin', you wouldn't blame me. There's—er—somethin' a little peculiar about the deal."

"It's all right," grinned Cranston, reassuringly. "I entered it with my eyes open—knowing all the facts. If there's anything wrong with it, that's my business. It's nothing I can come back on Smith for, I assure you. All I've got to add is—I'd hate to have Smith's luck. I've just bought a claim from him that I wouldn't sell for a million!"

"I'll say you won't," echoed Black John solemnly.

As he resumed his seat, he thoughtfully folded Cranston's I.O.U. and placed it in his pocket.

"I'll turn this paper over to Cush," he said to himself. "It'll jest pay his ten percent."

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